

SCOTPRESS

RETURN TO THE SOURCE



a
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fanzine

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RETURN TO THE SOURCE

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ScoTpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona

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Chapter 1

The heat was at its peak, and the ochre-red sand dunes of the desert were sizzling in the scorching fire of Eridani. The stone and glass buildings of ShanaiKhar space terminal, squatting on the barren plain, were shimmering in the heat haze, as though on the verge of annihilation in the blazing furnace.

Within the streamlined intersideral spaceport, however, thanks to the super-efficient airconditioning, the temperature was bearable to the natives of Tsaichrani, but still felt very hot to the few outworlders who happened to frequent the lounges and passenger areas.

One of the few Humans present did not seem to be affected by the uncomfortable temperature. Sitting by one of the tinted glass bays of the main lounge a lovely woman in her mid-fifties was gazing pensively at the view, the purple-black mountain range in the distance, and close by the movement of spacecraft on the landing pads.

Though her fair skin and greying blonde hair neatly dressed under the light veil revealed her Terran origin, she was attired in quietly elegant Vulcan robes of sky and ultramarine blues, matching the colour of her eyes. Her behaviour seemed wholly on a par with that of the Vulcans around her as she sat quietly fanning herself, but a close observer might have told that some outlandish emotions could not be completely repressed. The way that lady would glance repeatedly at the huge chronometer set in the wall for the benefit of foreign visitors - the innate time sense of the local people made clocks unnecessary on Vulcan - or the way she would shut her fan with a snap to unfold it again the next moment were sure signs of a state of excitement she tried to conceal from her placid neighbours.

From time to time a disembodied voice whispering from loudspeakers made her prick her ears, but apparently none of the announced flights were of any interest to the lady in blue.

Presently her attention was caught by the arrival of a young man, smart looking in a severe tunic, who, picking his way across the lounge, headed with controlled haste in her direction. She looked up at him expectantly.

With a slight bow he said in a low voice, "It has been reported, Lady Amanda, that the Falcon Spaceliner has been delayed at Starbase 10 because of ion storms. However, she is due to come in to terminal orbit in 36.3 minutes, and passengers will be shuttled here immediately. The company will make an announcement any time now."

"Good, Sirvann, we won't have long to wait now," Amanda replied. "Have you notified the Ambassador?"

"I did, my lady. I just called the office. He requested me to tell you that he will do his best to come home as soon as possible."

She inclined her head in acknowledgement, and continued waving her fan.

After a pause the young Vulcan cleared his throat and asked, "Is there anything I can do for you in the meantime? A cold drink, perhaps, or..."

"Unnecessary, thank you, but do go and have one yourself," she said kindly. "Just come back to show me to the reception area when it is time."

"I will, Lady Amanda." And with another stiff little bow he turned and walked to the cafeteria at the other end of the hall.

Amanda watched him go with a wistful smile. A nice boy, really; he reminded her of another youth who, many years ago, was also determined not to display any outward emotion. Her thoughts were interrupted by the loudspeakers coming to life.

"The Intersideral Flight No. 724 of the Vulcanair Company coming from Antares and Starbase 10 is expected in 22.4 minutes. Passengers taking flight 603 to the Sol system, Venus, Moonbase and Terra, are requested to report to Gate 3 for embarkation."

Amanda sighed, sat up, and slowly beat a tattoo on her knee with her folded fan, thus attracting the reproving stare of two elderly ladies sitting opposite her, but she did not care. After all, considering that she had been waiting twenty years for the passenger she was about to greet, she thought that her patience and composure were indeed praiseworthy. Another twenty minutes and the long years of sad expectation would be forgotten; the prodigal son would come home.

As she gazed absently at the landing field a sleek silver vessel came gliding down gracefully and landed at the end of one runway before taxiing along and disappearing behind one of the passenger gangways.

"Arrival of the Intersideral Flight 724, Gate 16," announced the imperturbable voice. "Passengers for ShiKahr, Thanouk and KulKanmar are invited to use domestic flights from Gate 22..."

But Amanda was no longer listening. She stood up and looked around, and saw her young companion coming to escort her to the reception area. Both made their way to Gate 16, hiding behind an outward indifference - and for different reasons - an eager expectancy.

Standing behind a glass security partition Amanda watched the incoming passengers as they presented their passports and credentials to Police Control. The Immigration and Customs officers, wearing dark green uniforms and the detached expression common to their trade throughout the galaxy, monitored all the travellers, Vulcans and aliens alike, as they stepped through the scanning cubicles.

The delay seemed unbearable to Amanda as she anxiously examined the long waiting line. Suddenly her heart missed a beat and she

caught her breath. Sirvann, whose keen eyes were also scanning the crowd, looked at her inquiringly, and as she nodded with a smile turned his attention back to the control section.

And there he was. No doubt about it. The man was unobtrusively dressed in casual travelling clothing covered with a heavy black cloak, a canvas bag slung over his shoulder. Nothing, at first sight, set him apart from the rest; still, there was no mistaking the erect and graceful bearing, nor the distinguished features so much like the portraits Sirvann had seen, and vaguely reminiscent of Ambassador Sarek's.

The young man tried in vain to repress his emotion at seeing at last in the flesh the living legend he had longed to meet for so long. Both he and Amanda observed with interest the reaction of the Immigration officer when the striking-looking traveller presented his papers for inspection. The man flipped through the documents uninterestedly, then suddenly started, looked up at the impassive face, and looked back again at the papers. Then he stood up, saying a few words while handing back the documents with a respectful inclination of the head.

The traveller responded with a quiet nod then walked on, apparently unaware of the very un-Vulcan emotion his mere presence had stirred in the police officers whose stares and whispers revealed their interest.

A few steps further, then as he walked into the crowded waiting room the man in the dark cloak gave a start, his composure somewhat shaken at the sight of the lovely woman in blue. He stopped short and swallowed convulsively, compelling his face to remain impassive.

"Spock!" the lady called softly, smiling and holding her hands out to him.

Slowly he dropped his bag to the floor, went to her and touched crossed hands in ritual greeting, drinking in the love and happiness shining in her blue eyes. "Mother!" was all he could say in a husky voice, but his dark eyes spoke volumes, and in the meeting of hands and eyes mother and son shared the emotions they could not display otherwise.

"My son," Amanda said, tears in her eyes, "welcome home, my dear."

"Thank you, Mother," Spock replied, recovering his poise, "but I did not expect you at the spaceport. Why did Sarek let you come at the hottest time of day?"

"Tut tut!" his mother retorted. "Sarek had nothing to say on the matter. Because of an exceptional meeting of the Supreme Council he was unable to meet you here in person, so I decided it was right and proper for me to come and greet my son. And I did not come by myself. Spock, this is my escort, your young cousin Sirvann, your father's private secretary."

Quite unaware of the rapt attention the young man was paying him Spock raised his hand in salute, saying, "Greetings, Sirvann. I appreciate your taking care of my mother."

"It is my privilege, Commander," Sirvann stammered, overjoyed at meeting his hero. "I... I beg to say, sir, that Vulcan is honoured by your visit."

Spock inclined his head in acknowledgement, and was about to pick up his bag when Sirvann grabbed it, saying, "Let me do that, Commander. I'll take care of your bags. Do you have the tags? Thank you. With your leave, Lady Amanda, I shall go and collect the bags and meet you at the parking bay."

"Yes, of course, Sirvann. We shall wait for you in the car." Then the happy mother turned to her son with a delighted smile. "Come, Spock - let us go home."

Chapter 2

The aircar, marked with the Foreign Ministry insignia, was flying swiftly over the red dunes heading towards the barrier of the L'Langon mountains looming up on the skyline. Young Sirvann, at the controls and anxious to prove his skill to a Starfleet Commander of Spock's reputation, was running the whole gamut, skimming over the crests of the sandy hills, plunging into canyons to dodge deftly between their rocky banks, then emerging over a cliff edge by a hair's breadth, sending billows of dust in all directions.

Spock, however, was sitting by his mother and gazing silently out of the windscreen, taking in the wild beauty of the desert he had so much missed. The shaken flight did not affect him - he was used to worse than that in space - but when at a sharp turn Amanda clutched his arm to keep her balance he held her and asked, "All right, Mother?"

"Yes, thank you, Spock." She looked at Sirvann, then back at her son with an indulgent smile. "I am afraid our pilot is showing off today," she whispered.

"Is he?" Spock said, puzzled.

"For your benefit," his mother explained. "He is a nice boy really, quite calm usually, but your arrival has set him all in a flutter. You remember old cousin T'Lynn, don't you? Well, Sirvann is her second grandson, and Sarek is training him in the diplomatic service, for he shows a certain aptitude for languages. Sirvann's sister, by the way, has been teaching music at the Academy for the last four years, and she is the soloist with the Philharmonic Orchestra. A very talented girl, and quite charming, this T'Kahalin."

"Really? Interesting. Is she performing in any concerts at the moment?"

"I believe so. We shall check at home. As for her brother, Sarek would be quite pleased with him, but for one big flaw." A mischievous glint shone in Amanda's eyes.

"Oh? And what is that?" her son inquired dutifully.

"A propensity for hero-worship."

"Indeed."

"Indeed, and the object of his worship is none other than you, my dear."

An embarrassed expression stole over Spock's face. "I did not

expect to find this kind of emotional behaviour here at home."

"That is where you are mistaken, my son. You have to realise that your exploits and those of Captain Kirk and the Enterprise are the talk of the galaxy, and have even reached your home planet. You have become a living legend for the young generation, like this boy here. Now at last Vulcans understand what they lost when they let you go because they could not accept your difference."

"Yes," Spock murmured thoughtfully, "the half-breed they scorned for being an Earther..."

"I know, my poor son, but that is all over now. They seem to understand at last that you have done as much for the fame of this world as generations of pure blood Vulcans have done since Surak's reformation. Why do you think you have been invited by the High Council?"

"Why, indeed?" Spock asked, watching her.

"Because of your reputation as a scientist and as a Starfleet officer, which has overcome the reticence of even the old guard of the Council, and the obstinacy of the deans of the Science Academy, who have clamoured to have you as guest lecturer. And Sarek has taken care of the rest, of course."

"I see," was Spock's non-committal comment.

"I hope that I have convinced you," answered Amanda. "Look, Spock, we have arrived. Sirvann, my dear, would you give us a short tour of the town before landing. Let us show Spock the new section."

Amanda with her intuition felt the pent-up emotions washing over her son at the sight of his home town. He did not say a word, and remained apparently unperturbed as he looked down at the lovely oasis city of ShiKahr nestling like an emerald and gold jewel in the heart of the barren wilderness. He could not help being sick at heart at the thought of those past years spent far away from such beauty,

As they hovered over the walls which at night tripled in height to protect the town from predatory beasts, over the avenues shaded with sweet-smelling trees, the residential mansions in their gardens and the public buildings in the city square, nothing much seemed to Spock to have changed as his mother pointed out to him the few transformations the City Council had undertaken.

The aircar swept over the city walls again, then after a sharp loop over the desert decelerated gradually and headed for the southern edge of ShiKahr where Sarek's family home was located. As on the way down they glided over a large circular stone enclosure some distance from the estate, Amanda shot a sidelong glance at her companion, watching for a sign, a reaction, but Spock remained impassive, almost unnaturally detached, his eyes coldly surveying their ancestral sanctuary as though nothing had happened there during the fateful Koon-ut kal-if-fee ceremony.

Total Vulcan self control, Amanda thought with a sigh. *Just like his father!*

When they finally landed near the house gate she dismissed the unwelcome memories from her mind and allowed Spock and Sirvann to

help her out of the aircar.

"Thank you, Sirvann," she said to the young Vulcan. "Won't you come in for a drink?"

"No, my lady, I must go straight back to the office."

"Another time, then. We'll send somebody to collect the bags. Come along, Spock - you must be tired after your long journey." And Amanda led the way along the path through the gardens.

Before leaving Spock said with a nod, "Thank you, Sirvann. That was... quite a memorable flight."

"My pleasure, sir. I am honoured," replied Sirvann, his face impassive but his eyes shining with delight.

Spock, sternly keeping his emotions in check, walked slowly up the winding path, all his senses on the alert to absorb the colours, the fragrances, the muffled sounds of the lush garden, the beautiful achievement of years of care and irrigation which had been his playground and refuge in childhood. His keen sense of observation noted some changes: trees which he used to climb had grown or been removed; a rose garden where there used to be a rockery; new varieties of alien plants adapted to the Vulcan climate.

Amanda, who had waited for him further on the path, asked with a gardener's pride, "So... what do you think of our garden? Has it changed much?"

"No, not really. It looks even larger than I remembered."

"You are right, Spock. We have gained a few acres on the desert, over there beyond the swimming pool. But shall we go in now?" Amanda went up the few steps to the portico running along the facade of the house.

Spock looked up, savouring the sensation of belonging to this home again, then followed his mother into the shade of the arcade entwined with colourful climbing plants. There, waiting by the door, stood an elderly couple; for all their Vulcan impassivity their trembling hands and bright eyes could hardly conceal a strong emotion.

The man said with formality and great dignity, "Bless the day when we can greet you back in your home, Commander."

As Spock gazed at them, deeply moved by the welcome of these family servants, his mother said softly at his elbow, "You remember T'Mina and Staurak, don't you?"

"Of course, Mother. How could I forget?" He held out his hands to them both, and they touched him lightly, palms outward, in the affectionate greeting of close friends.

T'Mina kept Spock's hand in her own and pressed it against her heart. "Bless the day, Spock, my little one," she murmured, her faded eyes peering up into his dark eyes with warm affection, and searching, in the austere features of the man, for the child she used to nurse and care for.

"Now, T'Mina," her husband chided mildly, "how can you call the Commander 'little one'? Don't you see what a fine man he has become?"

"Don't blame her, Staurak," Amanda put in kindly. "For his nanny, Spock will always be her little boy."

Then with a bow the old Vulcan opened the door, and they all walked into the house.

Holding his breath, Spock looked around the spacious hall lit on one side by a long arcade opening onto the riot of colours of the garden patio, and beyond onto the pool. The place he had left more than eighteen years before to enter Starfleet Academy was just as he remembered: the polished pavement of black and gold onyx with, in the middle, the fountain bubbling gaily in its green porphyry basin framed by plants; opposite the arcade, hung with flowering vines, the whitewashed wall punctuated by dark wooden doors displayed a collection of art treasures that his parents had assembled from various worlds during their diplomatic missions. Everything was just as he had often visualised during bouts of homesickness, yet he had never imagined he would be so moved by the simple feeling of being at home.

The others respected his thoughts and let him stroll, silently taking in all the beauty. Then a door opened and a young manservant came in carrying the bags.

"Shall I take these to the Commander's room, ma'am?" he asked Amanda.

"Yes, of course." Then, turning to her son, "Spock, don't you want to wash and change while Staurak unpacks your things? When you are ready, come and join me by the pool."

Spock roused himself from his thoughts and followed his mother up the hall to the sleeping quarters, which were located in another wing of the house.

"You see," she said, opening the door of his room, "your domain is as you left it. I only changed the bedcovers and the curtains, which were quite faded. Do you like the colour?"

Spock nodded and gazed silently at all the mementos of his youth, and at the distant view of the mountains beyond the desert, framed by the indigo and jade curtains. "Very much, Mother. I am grateful, and I thank you. I shall be ready in a moment. But," he went on as Amanda was about to leave, "is it necessary for the staff to call me 'Commander' all the time? It seems somewhat pompous to use my Starfleet rank here, don't you think?"

"I know, my dear," Amanda smiled indulgently, "but you must forgive them. They are so delighted to have the famous First Officer of the Enterprise in the house." Then seeing her son's eyebrows on the rise she added with a chuckle, "And don't put on that prim Vulcan air with me, Spock. Even here, people are entitled to a little excitement."

"Are they?" Spock looked mildly shocked. "Well, all I can say is that Vulcan must have changed indeed since my time."

"No, my dear, not really, as you will see. However, it is a fact that among the younger generation... Anyway, it is not for you to grudge them this fun and treat, since you are the cause of it all. Now I will leave you, Spock. I will see you soon."

Once alone, Spock shook his head. "Interesting," he murmured, then at the knock on the door he let the old servant in to unpack his luggage, and began to strip for a shower.

Chapter 3

Dinner was in progress in the family dining room. The windows were wide open to admit the cool night air. Just after sunset, which was quite sudden on Vulcan, the temperature dropped abruptly in the desert, a respite from the fierce heat which reigned during the day. Already stars twinkled in the moonless sky, and except for the gentle rustle of leaves stirred by the breeze and the sound of hushed voices coming from the kitchen, the peace of a Vulcan night enwrapped the house.

At the head of the table presided Ambassador Sarek, whose robust figure was emphasised by black and silver robes. The light from the silver candelabra which Amanda had displayed for the occasion softened his handsome face and erased some of its severity. While doing justice to the meal he was talking quietly in his measured voice. Traditionally Vulcans did not converse at meals, but Sarek felt that this first dinner together called for an exception, and he led the conversation to current mundane topics.

Amanda, sitting on his right, was content to listen, or to put in a word or two. For Spock's first evening at home she had decided to decline any invitations. Visits and family gatherings would be unavoidable, of course, but that would come later; tonight she and Sarek wished to keep their son to themselves. She was radiant with charm and happiness, and looked her best in a shell pink chiffon gown, her blue eyes gleaming in the candlelight.

Glancing across the table at her son, who was sitting at his former place on Sarek's left, she met his eyes watching her with an expression of... was it admiration? Fondness? or both, perhaps. Both, certainly, she realised with wonder. Rarely had those dark eyes held such warmth in their depths. Happily she recollected the moments of intimacy they had shared by the pool that afternoon. Spock, for all his Vulcan reticence, had shown discreet but unmistakable signs of his love for his mother. Never before had he been so open with her - at least, not since his Kahs-wan. As their gazes locked in mutual affection she flashed a smile at Spock, who responded with a slight quiver at the corners of his mouth.

Amanda was suddenly brought back to the present by a familiar presence in her mind.

\\You seem inattentive, my wife. Is anything the matter?
Sarek, who rarely missed anything, had not failed to notice the quiet interplay between mother and son, and had sent his silent message through their marital bond.

\\Pardon me, Sarek, she replied likewise, *\\but my attention is somewhat diverted by the presence of our son.*

A slight pause, then,

\\Quite understandable, came the quiet reply. Then Sarek resumed his argument, speaking aloud in his precise way. "So as I was just saying, the Council of ShiKahr should definitely consider..."

And Spock, as was expected of a dutiful son, responded to the discussion with comments and suggestions which seemed to fully satisfy his punctilious father.

As she watched them so absorbed in amicable discussion Amanda could not help feeling a pang of regret, even of resentment, at the thought of the family harmony she had so much missed since Sarek had disowned his son for having opted for Starfleet rather than the Vulcan Academy nineteen years ago. Thank god, the disagreement was over and done with since their voyage to Babel, but still, what a shame, all those years wasted. She was determined to turn this visit by Spock to the best account, and to get the most out of his presence in spite of the official meetings and lectures he was to attend.

While Amanda quietly supervised the service of the meal she observed with some amusement the discreet but assiduous way Staurak was dancing attendance on Spock, filling his glass, making sure he did not want for anything. Spock had always been his and T'Mina's favourite, and they had missed him terribly when he left.

And even Sarek! Sarek, the sober, fastidious diplomat, so expert at concealing his thoughts, was now allowing some appreciation of his son to become evident. True, Spock had saved his father's life two years ago when after a heart attack Sarek had required surgery on the Enterprise.

It was strange, Amanda thought, how those dramatic hours when both men's lives hung in the balance had done so much to bring father and son together. Of course, after the operation Sarek - true to type - had declared that any thanks to Spock would be illogical, but from that moment the two Vulcans had at least reached a certain understanding - one not devoid of reticence, however.

So naturally Amanda had anticipated their first meeting on Vulcan with some misgivings, wondering which of the two would make the first move. She had been taken aback by that unexpected scene in the cloister garden when Sarek had returned from the city.

She and Spock were sitting by the pool in the gallery when Sarek had come upon them, treading softly on the pavement. Seeing his father, Spock had risen with his cat-like grace and had greeted him with a silent hand salute. For a second the two men had faced one another, mirrored figures with the same impassive mask and striking good looks, so alike in their Vulcan robes. Then in a swift motion Spock had dropped on one knee and inclined his dark head before his father.

Amanda, shocked by this antiquated demonstration of filial reverence, had watched with baited breath for her husband's reaction. It had been as unexpected as Spock's move. Enigmatically, Sarek had looked down at his son, then he had gently placed his hand on Spock's face, fingers spread to touch the sensitive points of the mindmeld. For a brief moment the two Vulcans had remained in that position, eyes closed, in total silence. Then to Amanda's relief Sarek, a warm glow burning in his eyes, had broken the meld. Gripping Spock by the shoulders he had raised him and said at last, "Welcome home, my son."

With a thankful sigh Amanda once more brought her attention back to her companions and asked her son what his plans were for his vacation.

"I should be content just staying at home at first, spending time in the library, strolling around," Spock began. Then, glancing at Sarek, "But I expect you have already scheduled my daily activities, sir?"

"Quite right, Spock. You are here on shore leave, but you also have to fulfil your obligations as guest scientist since you have been officially invited by the High Council to lecture at the Academy and at the main scientific research centres."

"Certainly. When shall I know the schedule of the lectures?"

"I have it in my study. I shall give it to you presently, after dinner. You are to meet the Board of Professors and give your first lecture tomorrow, in the late afternoon, after which I understand there will be some kind of reception in the great hall of the Academy."

"Oh, Sarek! Why so soon?" Amanda asked with dismay. "Tomorrow? Spock has hardly had time to unpack and settle down. He needs rest."

"Rest easy, my wife," Sarek answered with his usual tranquillity while exchanging a glance with his son. "The programme of these lectures and talks is not strenuous, and will give Spock time enough for rest and personal activities. And he must also pay some visits to our relatives, first of all to T'Pau as head of our clan."

Amanda noticed that her son did not seem particularly elated at the prospect, and fully concurred with him. Visits to T'Pau were no fun at the best of times, and considering her adamant attitude to Spock a few years ago, he would be understandably wary.

"Very well," she said resignedly. "I quite understand that Spock has to do his duty, but please remember that he is on leave - and that I too have some suggestions for his holiday. Now, shall we go and have coffee in the gallery." She rose, and so did the two men.

To her surprise, Sarek addressed his son. "One moment, Spock. First I require your presence in my study, as I have to give you some information concerning your appearance tomorrow at the Academy. Amanda, will you delay serving coffee? We have to talk, Spock and I, and we shall join you in a moment."

Amanda knew better than to dispute over such a trifle as the after-dinner coffee ritual, but not being the kind to surrender meekly she replied, "Very well, my dear, but do not be too long. Coffee will be served in twenty minutes," and gathering the servants along with her, she walked briskly to the kitchen.

Spock followed his father along the hall, secretly amused by Amanda's reaction. She might have adopted the ways and traditions of a true Vulcan wife, but there was no doubt that at home she still had things her own way.

Once in his study Sarek took a tape cartridge out of a drawer then turned and faced Spock, who had remained standing just inside

the door. Their gazes met and held steadily, and the same thought came to both their minds; the last time they had faced one another in this room they had reached a complete impasse over Spock's future career, each stubbornly maintaining his stand. Sarek, feeling betrayed and incensed by his son's obstinacy, had solemnly and in his most glacial tones driven Spock out of his life. The dramatic scene was still vivid in their minds, and both realised that much patience and understanding would be necessary to wipe it out.

Sarek broke the silence by clearing his throat. "Spock, I had to take the risk of incurring your mother's displeasure, but as you are well aware extreme caution is essential in this matter. She does not know - and must not know - the true reason which brings you here." Seeing Spock raise a sceptical eyebrow he continued, "I admit that it is difficult to shield my thoughts from Amanda, but I am confident that she has no knowledge of this classified matter."

"What about feminine and Human intuition?" Spock inquired.

"If she suspects anything she has not mentioned it," replied his father. "But I would be interested to know what you know of Human - and particularly feminine - intuition."

"I... er... I have had some experience on the Enterprise, living among Humans for so many years," Spock replied with some diffidence. "I recall some incidents when my Captain has given evidence of a remarkable insight, which he likes to call intuition or a hunch. Dr. McCoy also and... some other crew members have happened to show, on occasion, the same... talent."

Spock remembered with some confusion the uncanny way McCoy had sometimes seen through his Vulcan defences, or occasions when Lt. Uhura, or Nurse Chapel, had seemed to guess...

"Is that so?" commented Sarek, eyeing his son with curiosity. "Interesting! But to come to the point, all this affair is strictly confidential, of course. Besides the President of the Supreme Council, you and myself, only seven people are in the know. Admiral van Rosenboom, who I believe gave you this assignment?" Spock nodded agreement. "Professor Delvaux and his two colleagues here, and Professor Stolar and his chief assistant, Sharakan. I assume that Captain Kirk has also been informed?"

"Yes, indeed. I could not embark upon this mission without telling my senior officer, and Starfleet finally shared my view. They probably recalled Captain Kirk's... violent reactions once before when he was kept in the dark about my... clandestine activities."

"From what I know of Kirk, I can well imagine!" Sarek retorted. Then, handing Spock the tape, "So, it is to be tomorrow. The sooner the better, and the safer. Here is the schedule of events for tomorrow, and the list of subjects the Academy Board would like you to cover in your lectures. Naturally, they know nothing of your mission. After your talk, and the usual questions and answers, a reception has been organised in your honour. All the scientific community of ShiKahr will be present. Yes, I know all this seems very official and rather tedious, but you must keep in mind, my son, that you are received as Starfleet's representative as well as a scientist of renown. What is more, Stolar's idea is that under cover of this reception you and he will be able to slip away without attracting attention. You will be approached by Stolar himself, or his assistant, suggesting that they show you their

latest computing equipment, and once in the vaulted room you will only have to log Professor Delvaux's data in their computer. How long will it take you?"

Spock frowned, deep in thought. "It took me twelve minutes to memorise, so I believe that fifteen minutes at most will be necessary."

"Good," replied Sarek. "We can assume, then, that you will be away for twenty-five minutes, and that this short absence will escape notice. Discretion is of the essence in this case. Once the formulae are safely logged in Stolar's computer our problems will be solved."

Spock looked rather perplexed. "May I ask, Father, why all this secrecy here? I know that some Romulan agents are suspected to be at work on Starbase 10, but here, on Vulcan, I thought we would be secure."

"Alas, Spock," his father replied, "it appears that the Romulans have spread their intelligence network as far as Vulcan. Starfleet Intelligence reports that the Empire is very interested in the research being carried out by Delvaux and Stolar. Stolar recently told me that they are on the verge of a crucial and top-secret breakthrough, and Delvaux's formulae, which you have brought, will allow his team to complete their work. Hence the importance of secrecy, especially since our own security department suspects the presence of informers working for foreign powers even in some high spheres of our community."

Spock's eyebrows climbed right up to his fringe. "Really? I would have thought that highly unlikely."

"Yes, wouldn't you? Who would imagine Vulcans spying for the Empire, giving information to the enemy. It seems so illogical, and yet... whatever their reasons, there seem to be Vulcans who are traitors to their planet."

After a pause Sarek continued, looking earnestly at his son, "You see now why your mission is of paramount importance, Spock. These people are clever, and have not so far been detected. This is why, in order to smuggle in these classified data, we decided to call you in under cover of a normal visit to Vulcan and travelling on a regular flight, so as not to attract attention."

"I see." Spock could not help thinking how typical it was of his father, and of Starfleet Command, to make use of him and to make decisions without consulting him. He could not refrain from commenting, "No doubt, sir, you deemed that it was the logical thing to do."

Sarek shot a sharp glance at his son. Did he detect a shade of sarcasm in that quiet tone, an ironic gleam in those dark eyes? Irresistibly he was reminded of their newly born complicity two years ago in the Enterprise sickbay, when both father and son had mildly teased Amanda and he had concluded the interplay by saying, "It was the logical thing to do." Obviously, Spock had not forgotten the incident. With a straight face, but with an appreciative lift of the eyebrows, he replied, "Absolutely, Spock, and I am sure you agree with me."

"Quite, father," his son replied, poker-faced.



"You were our last resort, my son. Come now, let us join your mother. We must not keep her waiting."

Staurak had set a low table in the cloister gallery by the open door of the sitting room, and Amanda was just bringing the coffee tray when Sarek and Spock came out of the study. She sat down in an armchair and watched the two robed figures glide silently, side by side, under the fragrant climbers hanging from the arcade. In a sudden flight of fancy they looked to her, in the half light, like two black and white friars haunting the cloisters of some strange monastery. But as they came nearer the glittering silver ornaments of Sarek's tunic and the ivory and amber tints of Spock's belted robe brought her back to Vulcan reality.

Once again Amanda was struck by their physical likeness, emphasised by their similar attire; the same striking appearance and quiet elegance, the same austere face, enhanced by the severe Vulcan haircut - Spock almost appeared to be a taller and slimmer version of Sarek. And yet there was something in his deportment, in his features, that his mother liked to attribute to his Human origin.

Sarek sat down beside Amanda. "I trust we have not kept you waiting, my wife," he said, laying his hand on hers.

She responded with a smile, and began pouring coffee into the precious porcelain cups brought from Earth. She handed one to her husband, then looked around. "Spock?" she called. "Tea or coffee?"

"Tea please, Mother," replied the deep voice from the sitting room, then Spock came out, sat down and took the cup. "I notice that you have had some more shelves fitted for your books," he remarked.

"I had to, Spock, with all the new publications I receive from Earth, and those you keep sending me. We shall have to think of building a new wing for the library before long!"

Sarek merely raised an eyebrow at such a blatant show of Human exaggeration, and was content with sipping his coffee, watching and listening. He did not take part in the discussion about Spock's entertainments and activities; he left it to Amanda, who had her own views on the matter. He only wished that tomorrow was over, and that the data Spock carried in his brain was safely stored in Stolar's secure computer.

Amanda was to remember that evening long afterwards. She felt a mutual understanding flowing between the three of them, and the reticence - more, the tension - which had existed between Sarek and Spock seemed to have gone since the mindmeld they had shared that afternoon.

Spock, after a while, wandered back into the sitting room, so full of memories from his youth. His parents heard him moving about, handling objects and books, opening cabinets, as if the mere touching of these objects took him back twenty years.

Then a melodious sound sent a shiver down Amanda's spine. Spock had swept long fingers across the strings of his grandfather's harp. Sarek and Amanda exchanged an expectant glance, then a few

notes were tentatively picked out on Amanda's piano.

In the ensuing silence she could not wait any longer and called, "Spock, my dear, would you...?"

"I am afraid I am rather out of practice, Mother. I would not like to put you or my father to shame."

"Oh come on, Spock. I am sure you have not forgotten. Just play anything."

The piano stool was drawn out and after a short pause a few chords were struck, then soft rippling notes rose in the silence, and the peaceful melody of an impromptu from Schubert swept over the patio.

Amanda turned a happy smile to her husband. "One of my favourites... He remembers," she whispered.

Sarek nodded with a warm gleam in his eyes, glad to see her so happy and satisfied to observe that Spock had lost nothing of his skill. Being himself a talented musician, and music being a long-standing tradition in the family, Sarek had been a stern teacher to young Spock, but the long hours of practice and scales had obviously produced very satisfactory results.

His wife, less concerned with the technique than with the performance, let herself be carried away by the romantic harmonies as Spock shifted from Schubert to Brahms, then to Schumann, slipping in some improvisations of his own.

Outside the desert breeze was blowing shrilly around the house, swaying the tops of the trees, rustling branches and leaves and sending ripples across the pool. But in the shelter of the patio it just sounded like a muffled background to the music, accompanied by the soft warble of some late birds, and it did not disturb the performer or his attentive audience - an audience which gradually increased as shadows could be seen emerging from the staff quarters and quietly sitting down under the arcade to listen, fascinated, to this alien music from another planet.

Chapter 4

Light years away from Vulcan, in a green and secluded valley on the small planet known as Starbase 10, a log cabin stood on the shore of a dark blue mountain lake. At this early hour of a bright sunny morning the wooden door was ajar, letting out the appetising smell of fried eggs and bacon.

Suddenly this peaceful atmosphere was marred by a crash of crockery, immediately followed by a furious exclamation. "Damn and blast! That's all I needed!" More grumbling, then, "Jim! Jim?"

Heavy footsteps stumped over the wooden floor, then the door was pulled sharply open, revealing a hot face and a pair of vivid blue eyes which looked right and left impatiently.

"Jim!" the man called again. "Where the devil are you?" Then as he spotted a distant figure down by the lake he shouted, "Jim, breakfast's ready! Come on!"

"Coomiiiiing! answered a distant voice, and the figure turned and climbed up the slope, stopping to pick up a basket by a pile of logs.

"Sorry, Bones, but the view is so beautiful just now on the lake that I forgot."

"Okay," McCoy replied gruffly, "you were daydreaming again... and the coffee pot is broken, if you want to know."

"What a wretched housekeeper you make!" Kirk laughed, and sat down at the table. "Never mind the coffee pot - we'll get another at the general store."

The two men sat at breakfast in silence for a while, but to the observant Doctor, who knew his friend's moods like the back of his hand, Kirk looked unusually thoughtful, even preoccupied. He went to the stove and brought back a pan. "Some more bacon?" he offered.

A pause, then Kirk looked up with a start. "What? Er... no, thank you, Bones."

McCoy set his pan down with a clatter, then plumped down in his chair and decided to take the bull by the horns. "Jim, tell me - what's the matter? Are you ill or something?"

Kirk sat up and pulled himself together. "Of course not. I'm fine. What makes you think...?"

"There's something on your mind, I can tell. Can I help, Jim? Care to tell me about it?"

"Sorry, Bones, but..." A sigh. "I am just a bit worried right now, but in a day or two..."

"Worried?" McCoy cut in abruptly. "Here? Where you have nothing to care about? Your crew is having a great time on shore leave, your ship is safe in space dock - all you have to do is catch some trout for dinner."

"I know, Bones. Sorry to spoil your fun."

"You're not spoiling anything, but you've got me wondering about you. Come on, what's eating you? Jim? Won't you tell your father confessor?" the Doctor asked, bringing up the standing joke Kirk used to tease him with.

But to no avail. Kirk looked embarrassed, pursed his lips and then declared, "Sorry, Bones, but I'd rather not."

"Oh, suit yourself, Jim!" McCoy retorted, somewhat huffed. Then getting to his feet he stared collecting plates and dishes. "But I bet the reason for all this nonsense is your precious Vulcan!"

Kirk looked up, frowning and red in the face. "How would you know?"

"My dear man," drawled the Doctor, "you've been in the blues for the last five days, ever since Spock left the base for Vulcan. Even I can put two and two together, because it's not the first time. Funny how you pine for that overgrown pixie as soon as you don't have him standing at your elbow."

"Don't be ridiculous! I'm not pining for Spock, or anybody. It's just that I... I wonder how he's doing, that's all."

"It's more than that, Jim. You're anxious. And I wonder why. After all, Spock's old enough to take care of himself, isn't he? What's more, he's at home, glad to be among people who are one hundred percent logical and unemotional. I'm sure he must be having a ball playing teacher to companies of stiffnecked scholars. That wouldn't be my idea of R&R, but there's no accounting for taste, is there?"

Suddenly Kirk felt that he could not stand McCoy's banter any more. He snapped angrily, "Oh, stop it, Bones!", and getting to his feet, rushed out of the room.

Surprised by such an abrupt and unusual reaction, McCoy realised that his attempt at humour had obviously missed the mark. There was probably more here than met the eye. Rather worried now, he walked to the door, and found Kirk sitting on the steps of the veranda, his head lowered onto his folded arms.

"Jim," he said gently, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. It was stupid of me."

"That's all right, Bones," Kirk mumbled. "Of course, you couldn't know..."

"Know what?" McCoy came and sat down beside his friend. "Do you mean that Spock didn't go to Vulcan just for a vacation and to lecture?"

Kirk seemed to debate with himself, closely watched by the astute Doctor. "Well," he said at last, "you guessed right. I really shouldn't talk about it, it's a classified matter, but you've had access to top secret information often enough, and it should be over by now, so..."

"Don't tell me, Jim, if you'd rather not. I don't want you to get into trouble with the Fleet, or whoever is concerned."

"I know any secrets are secure with you, Bones, and frankly I'll be glad to get it off my chest."

And Kirk poured out the whole story to his fascinated audience. When he and his First Officer had beamed down to the Commodore's office for the usual debriefing at Starbase 10, Spock had been given a coded tape sent from Vulcan. Kirk had assumed that the tape contained special instructions for the lecture tour Spock was to make during his stay there, but something quite different came out once the message was decoded.

"Mind you, Bones," Kirk explained, "Even I wasn't supposed to know anything about it, and what's more the tape was in High Vulcanur, therefore quite unintelligible to me, but as I was told afterwards, Spock insisted that as his commanding officer I should be notified of his mission. It took him the best part of an hour, and all his tenacity and his fabulous mastery of Starfleet regulations, to convince Admiral van Rosenboom that I should be informed. I understand that the old man hasn't recovered yet from his encounter with Spock's logical arguments," he added with a chuckle.

"I can well believe it," McCoy commented, having himself often

emerged defeated and exhausted from such arguments with the Vulcan. "I'll bet Spock didn't spare old Rosebud the least relevant paragraph, section, subsection and clause of the whole damned regulations."

"Of course not," Kirk replied. "Well, the outcome of all that fuss was that I was finally told that Starfleet Security, in cahoots with some Vulcans, had decided to use Spock as a secret agent. I must admit, though, that I still feel a bit peeved at having been presented with a fait accompli."

"And that's not the first time, with those brasshats," put in the Doctor.

"Quite right. Nor the last either, I'm afraid."

"One thing I don't understand," McCoy said. "Why Spock? Don't they have enough agents to do the job? Oh - it's because of the Vulcans, I suppose."

"Yes, that was one of the reasons, besides the fact that leave with his family was the perfect cover for the mission. But wait - you'll see why Spock was actually the only choice. So about an hour later we found ourselves visiting the Research Centre, just behind the main buildings of the base."

"Yes, I know. I've been there once."

"We found ourselves in the office of Professor Delvaux, who was Spock's contact."

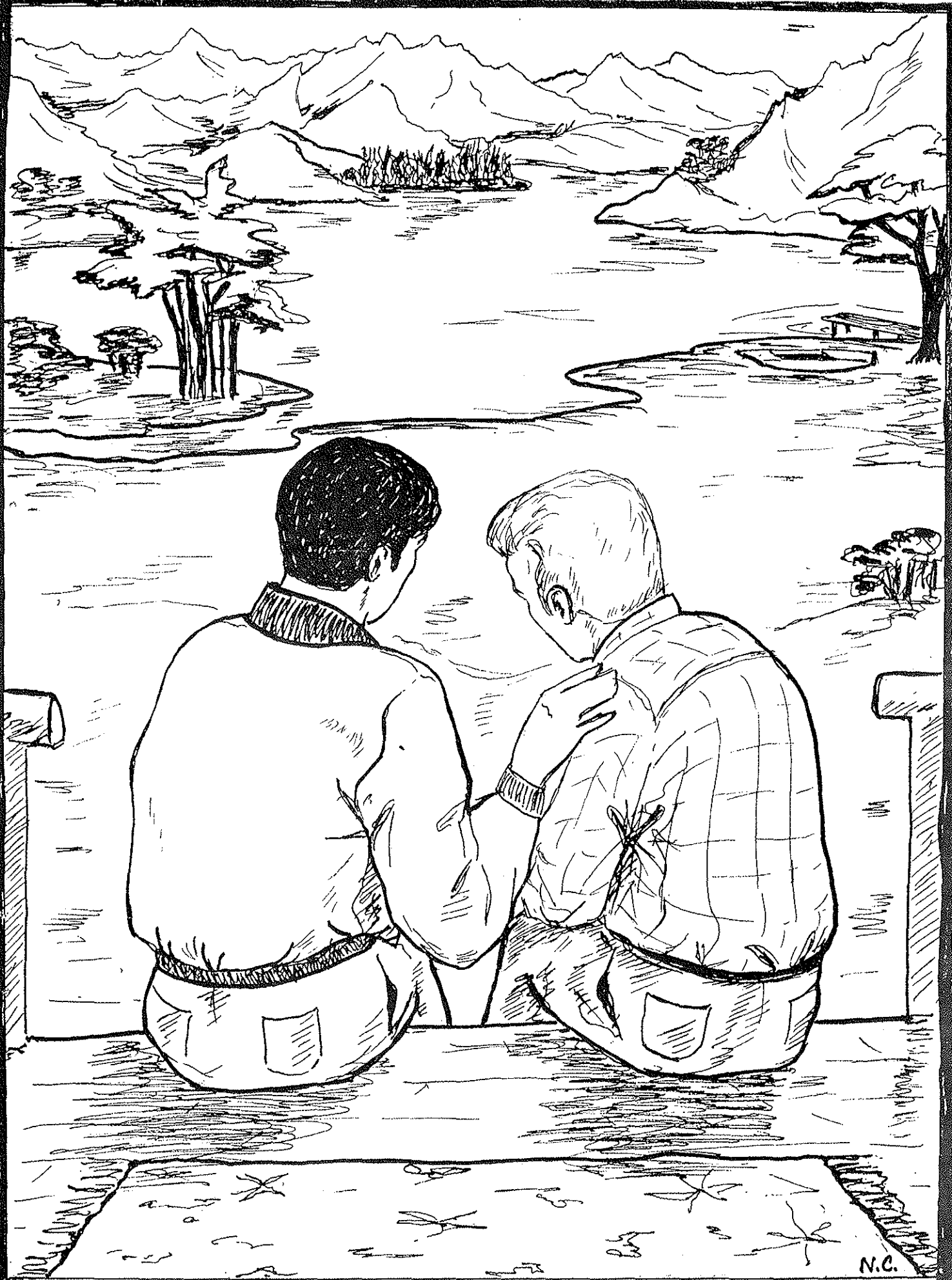
"Delvaux!" McCoy exclaimed. "Of course I know of him. He's an outstanding expert in biogenetics and bacteriology. I've read some of his papers - very thought-provoking! I heard recently that he's been working with a team of Vulcan scientists... I see. Jim, I see the connection."

"Yes, Bones, that's just it. That's where Spock comes into the picture. When we arrived Delvaux greeted Spock like a saviour. The poor man was very upset. He told us that after months of research they have at last found the solution proving their theories. He had conceived a set of formulae of great importance to the outcome of their research, and these data had to be relayed to his Vulcan colleagues for the completion of their work at the Science Academy."

"But why on Vulcan?" McCoy asked. "Why not at the Centre here?"

"Because Delvaux - and I don't blame him - doesn't quite trust his dear colleagues, Bones. This discovery, I understand, could well be a two-edged weapon. If used for peaceful purposes it could greatly improve the welfare of millions of people in the galaxy, but if it falls into the wrong hands it could be dynamite. There are people, as you know, who for money, power, ideology, anything, would not stop at turning apparently harmless inventions into deadly weapons. So with the peace-loving Vulcans, Delvaux feels secure. He knows that his inventions will never be put to bad use, and that's why he has worked with Vulcan scientists."

"Well..." breathed the Doctor, "you're telling me! And that's why Delvaux has entrusted his precious formulae to Spock, a Vulcan, to take to his home planet. I see now."



"But there's more than that, Bones. Delvaux told us that active espionage has been detected on some of the Federation Bases, and he know that his research is the object of keen interest by foreign agents. Imagine this discovery in the hands of Klingons, or Romulans! And during the last few months some leakage has been detected between Starbase 10 and the Vulcan Research Centre, and Intelligence has traced its origin to the Romulans."

"Good god!" McCoy was appalled.

"So," Kirk went on, "you see the danger. Therefore, since Delvaux could no longer rely on the usual channels to transmit the information safely from computer to computer, they decided to entrust the classified data to a living brain - Spock's."

"What? You mean that Spock...?" McCoy cried.

"Sure, Bones. When you think of it, Spock was really the logical choice: a scientist, a Vulcan with his eidetic memory, and a Starfleet officer with command training."

"Jim, this is too good to be true!" McCoy was gloating shamelessly. "To think how right I was all the time, calling him a damned walking computer!"

"It's no joke, believe me, Bones," Kirk answered seriously. "To see my best friend turned into a kind of recording machine... I tell you, it was... awesome."

"How did it happen?" McCoy asked, all agog.

"Well, Delvaux took us to his laboratory and then into a strongroom where he keeps all his documents and computers. There I was required to sit down and remain silent. The Professor unlocked one of his computers, and explained that it normally took twenty minutes to view the data. Then Spock asked for a few moments to prepare his mind for total recall; he retired to the other end of the room and slipped into the kind of trance-like concentration he gets sometimes."

McCoy nodded.

"Delvaux and I were just waiting, then after a few minutes Spock snapped back to life and said, deadpan, 'I am ready, Professor. Whenever you like.' and they began. Delvaux called up his formulae, and a quick succession of mathematical figures and equations flashed up on the screen while Spock sat there as though turned to stone, his eyes scanning the data as fast as they appeared. I could see that Delvaux was amazed. Only once did Spock raise his hand to stop the sequence and put a question. I remember the Professor asked him if it was all right, not too fast, and Spock said it was satisfactory, and could go even faster. In less than ten minutes he had the whole thing absorbed and stored in his memory, and that was that."

"Well," McCoy declared, "he really is something!"

"And then," Kirk continued, "we took our leave, along with Delvaux' warm thanks and blessings. He was literally bubbling with relief. No doubt this has taken a mighty load off his mind. It's up to Spock to take care of the data, and transfer them safely to Vulcan. As a matter of fact, Delvaux told me that as a matter of security the data banks of his invention would be destroyed right

away."

McCoy let out a long whistle. "So that leaves them with Spock as their only memory bank for their research, and if anything happens to him... They certainly took a risk!"

"I know," Kirk replied, "and that's what's been bothering me for the last five days. I don't like the idea of these Romulan spies at large. I made Spock promise to send me a message as soon as he delivered the goods, but so far... nothing."

"Jim, you can be sure that the Vulcans know what they're doing," the Doctor pointed out. "They've taken a calculated risk, logically, so we just wait and see. But I admit that it's not exactly a pleasure trip that Spock has taken. Did he calculate the odds?"

"He did. 74.435%."

"Mmm... no more than that?" McCoy asked, pulling a face.

"No," Kirk replied gloomily, "but he said he didn't take unknown random factors into account."

"Ah, the old fraud!" McCoy chuckled. "You see, Jim, our prim Vulcan would rather die than admit it, but he has to rely on chance sometimes, just like the rest of us. Random factors! I tell you, I'm sure he'll make it, Jim, just give him time. We'll probably hear from him before long."

Kirk smiled. There was nothing like airing your worries to a friend to relieve your mind. "Let's hope so," he sighed.

When the two friends returned in the evening, however, after a pleasant day spent fishing on the lake, there was no message waiting at the Guest House of the reserve. Very disappointed, Kirk switched on the video-com, but refrained from airing his feelings, knowing that the Doctor shared his concern about Spock.

He gave a hand in preparing supper, listening with half an ear to a variety programme broadcast by a popular intergalactic channel, then he supervised the cooking to let McCoy watch the 8 o'clock news at leisure in his armchair. He was carefully grilling the trout when McCoy's voice, tense and brief, called to him suddenly.

"Jim! Quick!"

"What is it?" he asked, joining the Doctor.

"Shhh! Listen!" hissed McCoy.

The latest news was delivered by a cool, cultured voice, while pictures flashed in quick succession on the screen, and Kirk suddenly saw a familiar face.

"... on Starbase 10. Our agent reports that the Professor's body was found in his laboratory early this morning by one of his assistants. There were no signs of injury, but the research equipment seems to have been sabotaged, for no apparent reason. Professor Delvaux had no enemies, declared his family and colleagues, and his death seems inexplicable. An enquiry into the

exact circumstances of his death is being led by the Security Service of the Base.

"The scientific community of the Federation is appalled by this tragedy. Professor Delvaux was a brilliant biologist, renowned for..."

McCoy switched off the set and looked at Kirk, stunned by the news.

"Oh my god!" Kirk whispered.

They exchanged a horrified glance, with but one thought in mind: if 'they' had done away with Delvaux... what about Spock?

Chapter 5

In the south wing of the Science Academy the Great Auditorium was filling up steadily. Most of the seats, set in semi-circular tiers, were already taken up to the galleries, except for the first three rows, which were carved in the same blue-green stone as the walls and floor. These places, forming a triple ring around the stage, were reserved for the Department Heads of the Academy, the Board of Professors, Academics, and other persons of note.

From shafts cut deep in the stone vault lights streamed down onto the inlaid marble floor of the central platform, and onto the audience, picking out the contrasting colours of robes and tunics, which ranged from ebony black to cinnamon, cobalt blue to white and tangerine, according to the college and branch of instruction of the students.

Thanks to the acoustic mastery of the architects and in spite of the great number of people, the hall was almost silent. Occasionally a low murmur would rise at the appearance of some Academic or Scholar. Such a discrete whispering ran round the hall when two men walked in sedately and sat on the first stone tier at the side of the stage. The elder was a frail-looking man whose lined face and cap of snow-white hair were emphasised by his dark brown clothes. He was quietly talking to his companion, a powerfully built man in the prime of life, regal in his jet black robes.

"I cannot deny that I am looking forward to listening to your son, Ambassador. This will recall many pleasant memories. Spock was one of my best students, so assiduous... brilliant, and quite unpredictable, sometimes. And that was so refreshing in the rather monotonous routine of my classes."

"Indeed, Professor?" Ambassador Sarek looked mildly amused.

"Certainly. He was so different, you know. Had something of his mother, no doubt... But I do not see the Lady Amanda. Isn't she going to attend the lecture?"

"She is. Actually, she should be here at any moment now."

As if on cue a young man appeared, leading a woman in a blue cloak and heading their way. Sarek stood up and greeted Amanda in his quiet way.

"You are just in time, my wife. I see that Sirvann has not tarried along the way." Then turning to the old Vulcan by his side, "You remember Professor Sradek of the History and Sociology Department, don't you?"

"Of course," his wife replied with a smile, one of her Human habits well accepted by her husband's people. "Greetings, Professor. It is a pleasure to meet you in these circumstances."

"Lady Amanda, I would not miss this talk for anything, nor would any of my colleagues. You might say that our positions are reversed today. We expect to learn from Spock."

Sradek at times revealed a dry sense of humour which Amanda never failed to appreciate whenever they met. She sat down beside Sarek and said in a low voice,

"Excuse my question, Professor, but I did not expect to see such a crowd. What do you think is attracting so many people to Spock's lecture?"

With a pensive look on his wise face Sradek replied, "I should say... a great deal of curiosity, Lady Amanda. It has been many years since Spock's reputation reached our planet, and naturally our scientific community - and his former teachers in particular - are curious to see what he has become, and to hear what he has to say. As soon as Professor Stolar obtained the necessary agreements the organising committee lost no time in advertising this series of lectures in all the Academies, and... here they all are, full of expectation."

Sarek stole a glance at the old man when he heard him mention the name of Stolar, but apparently it was in all innocence. "I hope," he commented dryly, "that they won't be disappointed by my son's performance."

Sradek shook his head. "I do not think so, Ambassador," he replied with a confidence that won him a warm smile from Amanda.

At last the double doors at the back of the stage were opened and a group of Deans and Teachers, clad in dark green and gold robes, walked in solemnly and took their places in the front seats at the foot of the stage. Two men, however, had remained standing by the door; when everyone was settled, and complete silence reigned in the auditorium, the shorter man, wearing the insignia of the Head of the Science Department, stepped up to the stage and at once became the focus of the lights in the vault.

After a few words of greeting he briefly sketched the career and scientific achievements of the lecturer he had the honour of presenting to the audience.

Sarek listened impassively to this laudatory speech, but Amanda knew better, and felt through their mental link that he shared their justified pride at hearing their son introduced in such glowing terms.

Presently Professor Sorel ended his address, turned round, and nodded to Spock, then stepped down and joined his colleagues. The lone figure who had remained standing by the door moved at last and

walked up to the platform.

A ripple of curiosity ran around the hall as the spotlights picked up his tall figure standing quietly in the centre of the marble floor. Sarek - dispassionately - and Amanda - admiringly - noted their son's perfect self control as he stood as ease, hands clasped behind his back, as though he was standing on the bridge of the Enterprise instead of being on this stage, the focus of hundreds of Vulcan stares. Amanda particularly observed how well his dark blue robes suited his slim figure, and how dramatically the flood of light from above outlined the regular planes of his impassive face.

\\He certainly looks Vulcan. Sarek thought with satisfaction.

\\Indeed, Amanda thought in answer, *\\and doesn't he look gorgeous?*

There was a brief moment of tense silence as Spock gazed around the auditorium, his cool gaze wandering over the audience as if purposely keeping them in suspense. He could not help being struck by the irony of the situation: he, the outcast boy who had been treated with icy disdain by his peers, was now standing in the Holy of Holies of Vulcan science, about to impart the best of his attainments to the intellectual elite of his planet. His face remained inscrutable as his glance swept down to the first tiers by the stage, but a warm glow shone in his eyes when they rested for a split second on his parents.

Nodding his head in approval, old Sradek murmured, "Clever... he knows how to catch and hold the attention of an audience."

Then Spock, turning deferentially to the scholars of the Board, raised his hand in ritual greeting and began to speak. His deep voice sounded loud and clear through the auditorium. A slight rustle was heard as people settled comfortably, and the silence of keen attention descended on the audience.

The first half hour was devoted to an account of the numerous activities of Starfleet Science section, of their research centres on various Starbases as well as their facilities on Starships like the Enterprise. Then Spock related some of the scientific programmes recently carried out by his team, and his talk became far too technical for his mother, whose interests were in linguistics rather than physics and cybernetics. Unlike her companions her attention lessened, and she allowed her thoughts to wander onto less austere subjects. The sight of Spock, solemn and grave, standing or slowly pacing the stage as he spoke in his precise, even donnish tones, took her mind back to the unexpected and amusing sight that had met her eyes that morning.

Amanda and T'Mina were laying the table for breakfast when Staurak's voice, backed by splashes of water, attracted their attention. Intrigued, Amanda went along the gallery, and there by the edge of the water, a bathrobe hanging from his arm, stood old Staurak. He was watching with obvious pride a slim, golden-bronze body swimming with powerful strokes, a wake of bubbles breaking behind him.

Amanda went and stood at Staurak's side. "What on earth!" she exclaimed. "Is this your former pupil, Staurak? he seems to have improved his style."

"Certainly, my lady; he is a master now," replied the Vulcan with satisfaction.

Both stood watching Spock as he swam back and forward in the pool, diving under the small waterfall, obviously enjoying himself. Then he turned swiftly and surfaced near the edge, treading water.

"Good morning, Mother," he called. "I am reverting to old habits, as you see. How long, Staurak? 40.35 seconds, wasn't it?"

"No, Commander, I regret to say that you covered the distance in 40.38 seconds this time."

"Really? I had the impression it took me less than that."

Amanda couldn't help laughing. Spock's dripping dark hair and sparkling eyes reminded her irresistibly of her six year old son when he was taking his swimming lessons with Sarek or Staurak and disputing the result of his timing.

"Where did you practice swimming, Spock?" she asked. "You're quite good at it now."

"Remember, Mother, we have a large swimming pool on the Enterprise."

"Oh, of course," she smiled, remembering her journey to Babel on Spock's ship. "How could I forget! Well, have you done now? Breakfast is being served."

In answer Spock dived deep and shot underwater to emerge on the other side at the foot of the steps. Climbing out, he found the faithful Staurak waiting for him with the bathrobe and towel. After a quick rub down Spock tied the robe, announced, "I shall be with you in three minutes," and padded away, leaving wet footprints all along the way.

Amanda, watching him go, reflected what a fine specimen of Vulcan manhood the lanky youth had turned into, and exchanged a glance with Staurak. "It's like the old days, isn't it?"

"Indeed, my lady."

With a happy sigh Amanda turned her attention back to the auditorium, and the fine specimen of manhood, turned into a lecturer, who was now engaged in answering questions from the audience. She knew that her husband had noticed her inattention, but she felt somehow that he did not mind. She could not know that Sarek himself was unusually absent-minded, and that he kept glancing surreptitiously at two scientists sitting opposite, Professor Stolar and his assistant Sharakan.

For all his placidity Sarek was preoccupied by Spock's assignment, and by what was at stake. However, judging that there was no reason for illogical anxiety in the secure precincts of the Academy, he relaxed and observed with interest the way Spock handled the debate and replied to the numerous questions put to him.

Some questions were short, some were long-winded, or searching, even incisive, but all were pertinent, and proved the interest of the audience. Sarek noted with satisfaction his son's perfect

composure as he submitted to what amounted to cross-examination.

When the questions turned to Spock's discoveries during the course of the Enterprise's mission, which he had published in scientific papers, Professor Sorel stepped in and interrupted the debate.

"These important discoveries," he declared, "will be the subject of the next lecture, which will take place in three days time, and to which all present are invited." Then after a few comments on Spock's instructive talk he declared the meeting closed.

Vulcans do not clap, but they all rose to their feet when Spock, after the ritual salute, left the stage with his host and the senior teachers. Then a low murmuring began as people exchanged comments and found their way out.

Amanda smoothed her long gown and turned, bright-eyed, to her companions. "Well, gentlemen, what is your opinion?"

Professor Sradek gazed at her with the hint of a smile in his faded eyes. "Do you recall, Lady Amanda, how many years ago I said that I had great hopes for Spock's abilities, and believed he would go far? it seems that I was right. What we have witnessed was a remarkable performance indeed, clear, precise, and extremely well informed. Your son is a born teacher, besides being an eminent scientist, Lady Amanda, and he does honour to Vulcan, Ambassador."

Sarek, thus addressed, shook his head. "That may be, Professor, but he would have done greater honour to the Academy had he complied with my wishes and conformed with our family tradition."

"True, the Academy may have lost much when he left for Starfleet. But do not spend time in illogical regrets, Sarek; I believe he made the correct choice. Spock is in his proper place, and consequently his reputation - and that of Vulcan - spans the galaxy. If he has found his path, let us rejoice. But forgive me - I am talking, and keeping you from the reception. Do you know where it is taking place? I would be pleased to meet your son again."

"Do come with us, Professor. I am sure that Spock will be honoured to talk with you," Amanda replied, so grateful to the old Professor for his wise words.)

They left the auditorium in the wake of Ambassador Sarek, whose commanding figure always succeeded somehow in opening a way through crowded rooms.

Chapter 6

Half an hour later, in a crowded reception hall which overlooked the botanical gardens and offered a beautiful view over the desert, Professor Sradek's wish was fulfilled. The reception, organised by the Science Department Committee, was a great success. The guests were standing about in groups around the refreshment tables, and the hum of conversation rose up to the lofty beams of the vault.

Pausing at the door, Sarek and Amanda looked around for Spock, and found him standing in the midst of a group of Vulcans who seemed to have shed some of their traditional reserve and were plying him

with questions.

Sarek raised an ironic eyebrow and commented dryly, "I am afraid, Sradek, that my son is rather hard to reach."

"Nonsense!" his wife declared firmly. "We only have to catch his attention. Come, Professor..." and she made her way gracefully through the hall, old Sradek in tow, until she eventually reached Spock and claimed his attention.

Although his expression remained neutral Spock was moved at the sight of his former teacher in the company of his mother. He remembered how the understanding and encouragement of his Professor had often been a moral support when the ceaseless taunts and open scorn of his schoolmates had been more than he could bear. Spock greeted Sradek with respect, and the two of them were soon immersed in recalling long past memories.

Seeing her son so happily engaged, Amanda looked around for Sarek and saw him standing by one of the windows, deep in conversation with some of the prominent scholars of the Academy; one of them she recognised as the Head of the Biology Department, Professor Stolar. She paused on her way by one of the buffets to get herself a drink, and joined the group in time to hear Stolar mention Sarek's expertise in computing technology, and enquire about Spock's qualification in that speciality.

"Spock is one of Starfleet's computing experts, a Grade 7," Sarek answered with a touch of pride.

"Indeed?" Stolar looked impressed. "That is a rare level to reach. Remarkable. I wonder... Do you think he might be interested in seeing our new TK 17 model?"

"Oh certainly, he would be grateful. I do not believe that Starfleet has anything like it. It is most kind of you to offer Spock the opportunity to study this new model."

"I would be honoured, Ambassador. When would it be convenient?"

"Whenever is convenient to you, Professor. But... why not now, since we are all here?"

"That would be perfect. Say... in twenty minutes?"

"Sarek," Amanda put in, "I don't think it would be courteous to take Spock away from his hosts in the middle of the reception. Couldn't he go tomorrow, or another day?"

Sarek's and Stolar's eyes met for a split second, and Sarek replied smoothly, "It will only take a few minutes, my wife, and I am sure that Spock can be spared for that short time. What is more, Professor Stolar's time is precious, and he might be engaged tomorrow."

"Yes, indeed; today would be preferable," Stolar remarked, taking the hint.

"Very good," Sarek declared firmly. "I shall notify Spock."

"And Sharakan here will come in twenty minutes to show him the way, Ambassador. Now if you will excuse me..." With a slight bow

the Professor departed, as relieved as Sarek at having successfully paved the way for Spock's temporary withdrawal in spite of Amanda's innocent remark, which had almost upset their carefully rehearsed plan.

When apprised a moment later of the treat in store for him, Spock took the news with a suitable show of interest, and all that was left to both father and son was to wait calmly for the crucial moment while conversing calmly with the other guests. Amanda, in the meantime, took advantage of a lull in the conversation to take her son to the refreshments, and to present some young men and women who had been waiting hopefully for an introduction to the Starfleet Commander.

Though she was not a scheming mother, Amanda had personal reasons for this move, since among the young Vulcans were some particularly charming and clever girls. In spite of Spock's disinterest in the fair sex, especially since his rejection by T'Pring, his mother did not give up hope of finding him a suitable and loving wife whom Sarek would approve of. So in her easy and gracious way Amanda introduced everyone, and with his customary courtesy Spock replied with a few words, but so far with total indifference. Feeling a little vexed by his lack of reaction, she introduced the last two of the party.

"And this is Sirvann, whom you have already met, of course, and his sister T'Kahalin, our favourite musician."

Spock gave a nod to the young man then turned to the girl, and found himself gazing into two luminous pools of such beauty and limpidity that he was left speechless. For a brief instant which seemed an eternity dark eyes locked into golden-green eyes, amazed at the emotional response each perceived in the other. Spock had the impression of quenching his thirst in the cool waters of a mountain brook, and the breathless girl felt herself warming to a hidden fire burning deep in this unfathomable darkness.

Amanda, who noticed their sudden fascination, went on talking quietly with the others to give them time to recover their composure. Spock finally took a deep breath, blinked, and managed somehow to break the spell and regain some control over these bewildering emotions, while T'Kahalin did her best to hide a confusion which almost frightened her, and gradually joined the conversation which turned to music and her impending concert with the National Orchestra in ShiKahr.

Spock, his cool self once again, took advantage of the conversation to observe T'Kahalin discreetly, and he had to acknowledge that with his taste for beauty she deserved his attention, a slender girl with the Vulcan grace in her bearing, but set apart by the poise of her lovely head and the shape of her hands, the hands of a musician; her simple gown, in a pale lime green shade outlined with silver bands, enhanced her shapely figure; her auburn locks were gathered back with a silver band and allowed to fall gracefully on her shoulders in an antique Greek style.

Fascinating, he thought. She looks like a Tanagra.

The fact that he himself was the focus of the girl's covert attention escaped his notice completely. Having been for years accustomed to the disdainful stares of Vulcans, then to the glaringly obvious curiosity of Terrans, males and females alike, Spock was quite unaware of her discreet, appreciative glances.

They were unfortunately interrupted in the mutual appraisal by the arrival of Sharakan, Stolar's assistant. Coming to a halt at Spock's side the man said in his cold voice, "Commander, Professor Stolar is ready to show you his laboratory."

On the way out in Sharakan's wake Spock looked around for his father. As their eyes met Sarek gave a slight nod, and Spock left the room. Then the Ambassador turned his attention back to his companions, confident that so far everything was going according to plan. Ten minutes earlier he had seen Professor Stolar leave with the Committee secretary, and now his assistant was showing Spock to the computer vault. In half an hour the whole business would be concluded and the unobtrusive security guard he had posted by Spock could be removed.

Some time later, however, Sarek's peace of mind was badly shattered. There by one of the doors stood Stolar, looking anxiously about the hall then beckoning him out insistently. Fuzzled and suddenly worried, Sarek joined the Professor, who quickly drew him aside.

"Stolar, what is it?" the Ambassador inquired sharply.

"Sarek, this is appalling!" Stolar stammered. "I have just received a coded communication from Starbase 10. My colleague, Professor Delvaux, has been murdered and his laboratory ransacked. They have killed him, Sarek." The man could hardly control his grief.

Sarek, frozen with shock, laid a comforting hand on the man's shoulder and gave him time to collect himself.

Then Stolar said in a calmer voice, "It is a terrible loss for science, and of course for our research work here. Now everything depends on Spock. Will you call him? We must go down to my computers immediately."

Sarek started, and stared at Stolar in disbelief. "What are you saying? Spock left with your assistant ten minutes ago."

Stolar stared back, and changed colour. "But.. I don't understand. I was in the Communication Centre all the time. Sharakan was to wait for me; I never told him to fetch Spock. This is inconceivable!"

Sarek suddenly felt cold. Grasping Stolar's arm he said, "Come, Professor, we must go now and ascertain what has happened. They may be waiting for you, for all we know. Let us go and make sure."

The two men quickly strode down the hall, both feeling that something had gone wrong.

Once in the lift Stolar, as if to persuade himself that their alarm was ill-founded, repeated, "I cannot account for Sharakan's action, but I trust there must be a logical explanation."

"Do you? Then let us hope you are correct," Sarek retorted.

Once in the basement the Professor led the way along corridors and passages and finally stopped in front of a shielded door. He opened a small trap in the wall and dialled a code; silently the massive door slid open, revealing a long room, dimly lit, empty, and

except for a gentle humming from computers and apparatus, silent.

Stolar rushed in, looked around, then turned to Sarek. "They are not here," he stated needlessly.

"Obviously," Sarek replied, stone-faced; his eyes were alive with concern. "Professor, let me ask you something. How long has Sharakan been your assistant, and how much do you trust him?"

Stolar looked shocked. "He has been my Chief Assistant these last four years; I have always trusted him implicitly. Do you mean...? I can't believe that..."

Just then footsteps were heard in the corridor, and the two men looked to the door expectantly, but it was a young woman in dark overalls who appeared in the doorway.

"Oh, it is you, Professor. My apologies for intruding, but seeing the door open I came to ascertain whether..."

"T'Mour," Stolar interrupted, "tell me, did you see anyone within the last half hour? Did you see Sharakan with a tall, thin man?"

"With Commander Spock?" she said brightly. "Yes indeed. They walked past my office twenty minutes ago."

"Were they coming this way?" Sarek inquired.

The young woman pondered for a few seconds, then shook her head. "No, I heard them turn in the other direction, towards the storerooms, but as I was engaged in an experiment at that time I did not pay much attention. Is anything the matter, Professor? Can I help?"

"If you will, T'Mour. We are looking for Sharakan and Spock, and it is imperative that we find them now."

The search began with the help of the young scientists and her assistant. However, it did not take long to discover something which unfortunately corroborated Sarek's worst fears. They had turned a corner in the long corridor, and were near the storerooms, when T'Mour stopped short, looking down at the tiled floor.

"Look - this looks like blood." She stooped and touched a dark stain with the tip of a finger. "It is not dry yet, and there are more spots along the way," she said, pointing down.

Sarek grimly followed the trail of green stains, which led to a half open door. "This is a storeroom, isn't it?" he asked, then pushed the door open and strode in. They stopped just inside the door, listening intently, but there was not a sound.

However, when they began to search they made a gruesome discovery: behind a stack of crates lay the lifeless body of a man. Sarek knelt down and gently turned the man's head to the light. They gasped with horror - half of the face was gone.

"Great Powers!" Stolar whispered. "Who is this? Who has dared to commit this crime?"

Sarek looked up at him. "This was one of the guards assigned to Spock's security. And who is responsible for this murder? You

and I, Professor, have a very good idea, do we not? But tell me - I seem to remember that there was an exit somewhere that led directly to the rear of the building."

"Yes," replied T'Mour, "we use the back door for the delivery of equipment and supplies, and this conveyer belt here leads directly to the service area at the back of the building."

"Of course," Sarek mused aloud. "What could be easier than using this conveyer to carry something - or someone - concealed in a crate to the back door, then to a van or some other vehicle. We won't find Spock here, Professor."

The two men stared gloomily at one another. Spock, the depository of a fantastic and awesome knowledge, had been abducted by enemy agents, with the complicity of Stolar's trusted assistant.

As if to confirm their suspicions one of the girls came over, holding in her hand something that glittered.

"I have just picked up this object from under that bench, where it must have rolled. It is broken."

Sarek took it and turned it slowly between his fingers. "This belongs to Spock," he whispered. "It is a piece of his belt buckle, probably torn away in the struggle." Closing his hand convulsively on his son's token, Sarek abruptly turned away and paced a few steps, fighting for control.

After a brief moment of silence Stolar's voice was heard. "Sarek, we grieve with you, but consider: if they had wanted to eliminate Spock, they would have killed him here, as they did the guard. The fact that they took him away logically means they want to keep him alive."

"True, Stolar." Sarek turned back, his face livid. "But for how long, and with what aim? I don't need to explain the purpose and implications of this outrage, do I?"

"No, of course not. I know, and like you I dread, the possible appalling outcome of the capture of your son. All the more reason for prompt action, Sarek. We must find him before it is too late."

With an effort Sarek recovered his usual stoicism. "You are right, Stolar. Pray forgive this lapse of mine. It seems that logic fails me when my son is concerned. Time is of the essence. Let us go."

After that things moved rapidly, and with Vulcan efficiency. As soon as they were informed of the events the responsible authorities took the necessary steps. The body of the unfortunate guard was moved to the nearest hospital, and investigators went through the basement with a fine-tooth comb, looking for clues.

The Director and the Heads of the Academy Departments were apprised of the impending danger by Professor Stolar, while the President of the High Council and Starfleet Security were warned by Sarek himself, as a member of that Council and Vulcan representative to the Federation.

Then, having set things in motion, Sarek took time to turn his attention to personal matters, and went, heavy hearted, to the Reception Hall to tell Amanda what had befallen their son. That was

what he dreaded most.

Chapter 7

Slowly, painfully, Spock came round to a splitting headache and an unpleasant nausea. As he tried to wet his parched lips he became aware of the gag that choked his mouth.

He opened his eyes, to find that he was blindfolded, a dark cloth drawn tight over his face. He tried to move his numbed limbs, but was unable to do so; from that he inferred that he was tightly bound as well.

Having checked his physical condition, Spock proceeded to appraise his surroundings. Above the unmistakable drone of an aircar engine he heard male voices, three - no, four - voices talking some distance away. He tried to catch something of what was said, and then realised that the language spoken was not Vulcan, but Romulan.

So, he thought dispassionately, all the safety measures had been taken to no avail. The Romulans had escaped detection by security sensors, and succeeded in kidnapping a Starfleet officer on Vulcan soil and in the very sanctuary of Vulcan tradition and culture, the Academy. What a blow to Vulcan pride!

Shaking with anger and vexation Spock moved his head and stifled a groan at the stab of agony which drove like a knife through his brain. At once he activated the pain control techniques and forced his mind to recall methodically the events before his blackout.

He had been knocked on the head, hence the throbbing headache; he definitely remembered the stunning blow, then blood trickling down his face. But before...? He was walking along the corridor behind... yes, Stolar's assistant. He even remembered asking why it was taking so long to reach the laboratories - they used to be located much nearer to the lifts. Sharakan had explained that Stolar's labs were located in the new wing.

Just after walking past a door he had heard a faint sound behind him and whipped round to receive the blow which sent him reeling to the wall. Yes, and then the fight - that silent, deadly fight - and three men in overalls - Romulans, apparently - hammering at him. One thing stood out in his memory: Sharakan's face, and that cold, implacable stare, standing there watching, as if waiting to give the final blow. Indeed, Spock thought bitterly, Sharakan had landed the final blow.

The last thing he recalled as he had collapsed was bringing one of his assailants down with him, but after that, nothing, a blank. He must have passed out, and judging from the nausea and his stiff neck, he had been brought down with a neck pinch. A neck pinch dealt by the other Vulcan present - Sharakan.

Spock went cold as he realised the implications. This was the irrefutable proof that the Romulans' inside agent, the 'mole' who for so many years had traded information to Rihansu, was the trusted collaborator of one of Vulcan's top scientists, a man above suspicion. Sarek's presumption had proved true, alas: there was a traitor highly placed on Vulcan, perhaps more than one. This could

not be; something had to be done!

In a desperate, illogical reaction, Spock strained frantically at his bonds but to no avail, except that they cut excruciatingly into his wrists and ankles. The scraping of his boots on the floor brought one of his captors over. Spock heard footsteps halt by his side, and a voice sniggered,

"Well, Commander, coming out of your beauty sleep, are you? Don't be too impatient - we'll soon have a long conversation together. There is much you will have to tell us, you damn Starfleet spy!"

Vicious kicks were rammed into his side and back, which he bore in stoic silence. There was laughter among the men, and one called out,

"Stop it, you fool! Don't damage him too soon. We need him unscathed for a time, until he has revealed all we want to know. When he has served his purpose, then he will be all yours - at least, what will be left of him!"

There was more laughter. "And about time," the other growled fiercely. "I can't wait to square accounts with this bastard!"

Having delivered another kick the Romulan went back to his seat, and Spock was left bruised and aching.

A thought came immediately to his mind. Here was probably another backlash from the incident with the Romulans and their cloaking device. He seemed never to be done with the unfortunate deception he and his Captain had practised on the Romulan Commander. Spock spared a wistful thought for that remarkable woman, and their too-short encounter, wondering once more just what the outcome might have been under other circumstances. It was just as well that Jim was safely on Starbase 10, for that man, possibly an officer from the Romulan crew, seemed determined to avenge himself and his Commander.

Spock coolly considered his present situation. It seemed rather desperate. One thing puzzled him, however. His captors obviously knew that he carried some vital information. How did they know? Where was the tragic flaw in a seemingly leak-proof scheme? One thing was certain: the Romulans were determined, and surely had the means, to force classified information from Spock... and Spock was as determined not to let them have it. That was the problem in a nutshell.

Shortly afterwards the voyage ended. The craft landed smoothly and a hatch was pushed open. The bonds tying his legs were removed, and he was dragged outside and down some steps.

He stumbled uphill on uneven ground, and felt the heat of the setting sun on the back of his head. He could make out distant sounds, female voices, the shrill cry of a bird far away, then the group entered a close space where their footsteps resounded hollowly. Finally they stopped, and he was pushed against cold damp rock - a cave, probably. A heavy door was opened, creaking on rusty hinges, and a hand brutally shoved him forward to fall on hard stone.

"Your apartment, Commander Spock," a sneering voice said. "But do not fret - we will soon call upon your infallible memory!"

The door clanged shut and Spock was left alone. With a sigh he tried to ease his aching body, and in anticipation of the impending ordeal he calmly and methodically went through the ritual mental exercises in order to shield his mind, and the crucial secret hidden within.

CHAPTER 8

Vulcan was in a state of shock. For all their traditional impassivity the whole planet, and the ShiKahr community in particular, had been revolted by the news of the outrage perpetrated in their midst by foreign agents.

An emergency meeting of the Supreme Council had been summoned in the middle of the night to deal with this intolerable situation. Sarek, after giving a brief account of Spock's mission and of the evidence of his capture, had resumed his seat and was now listening to the Security Chief's report.

Following the first investigations some facts had already been established. The bodyguard had died of radiation caused by a Romulan disruptor. The bloodstains on the floor had been analysed: the blood belonged to the rare T-negative group, and contained traces of Human elements. The Chief glanced at Sarek, who assented with a nod. Various footprints had been detected in the basement and in the back yard, as well as traces of an aircar or van. A transport van had been stolen in the afternoon, and found abandoned on the edge of the desert north of ShiKahr. No clue had been found in it, and no sign of Spock or his abductors had been detected anywhere, but it was logical to assume that they were still on Vulcan.

A heavy silence followed the statement, then Sholek, Head of the Council for a year, invited the Home Affairs Councillor to describe the steps already taken for the security of the planet and the rescue of Spock. Sarek listened with half an ear, as he had himself recommended most of the measures.

As soon as the outrage was known all communications with other worlds were interrupted. Spaceports were closed to traffic and heavily guarded. The network of satellites in permanent orbit and a number of scoutships kept watch to prevent, by force if necessary, the take-off or entry of any vessel. Finally, short and long range sensors were monitoring any movement of private aircars or skimmers on the surface, as well as all private communications.

Here, some members of the Council objected. These measures, they flatly declared, definitely transgressed that most precious of Vulcan traditions, privacy. This led to an intolerable situation, equivalent to a state of war.

Sarek felt a certain touch of impatience at this lack of discernment, and said ironically, "I beg your pardon, but if the murder and kidnapping of Vulcan citizens by enemy agents are not to be considered as acts of war, when what are they? Whether you like it or not, this extraordinary situation calls for extraordinary measures, amounting to what Terrans call Martial Law, and we must all agree to a drastic course of action without any loss of time."

During the discussion that followed someone hinted that Sarek's judgement was of course biased, since the victim of the assault was

his own son.

Sarek's temper, usually kept in check, flared up at that accusation, and he was about to retort sharply when a cold voice cut into the discussion.

"Kroykah!"

Everyone fell silent and turned to the majestic old woman who had been sitting and listening in disapproving silence.

"All this discussion is a waste of time," T'Pau declared sternly, "and time is of the essence in the present situation. If we want results we must provide our Security Department, and all other responsible sections, with the means to obtain them. And do not imagine that I support Sarek's motion for family reasons, because Spock belongs to my Clan," continued the indomitable dowager, her black eyes glittering like jet beads in her wrinkled face. "A more important issue is at stake. You have heard Solar's statement; you understand that should Professor Delvaux's formulae become known to the Romulan Empire, our world - the whole galaxy - may be in jeopardy. Will you let the Romulan agents and their Vulcan accomplices get away with this crime?"

A movement of uneasiness ruffled the Council in response to T'Pau's forceful speech, to Sarek's secret satisfaction.

Good for her! he thought, borrowing a Terran expression from Amanda. *This should force them to make up their minds.*

A hand was raised, and a woman declared coldly, "We are all well aware of the danger if the data fall into enemy hands. But for all we know they may already be in their possession. Romulans, like Klingons, are renowned for having the means to force information from their prisoners. Who knows whether Commander Spock can withstand their methods of questioning?"

Sarek, feeling everyone's attention on him, slowly rose to his feet and faced the questioning stares with perfect composure. "Spock's sense of duty, of loyalty to his people and the Federation, will prevail. He is a Vulcan. He will not tell them anything."

"He is half Human, Sarek," President Sholek pointed out, "and Humans are known to be unable to withstand pain or stress like the Vulcans."

"True, but remember, Sholek, that my son is also a Starfleet officer, who has had special training. When some time ago he was captured by the Klingons and subjected to their mind-sifter, they obtained nothing from him."

Sholek nodded his acknowledgement, but T'Pau brought up another point.

"That is as may be, Sarek. I concede that Spock acts like a true Vulcan. But you forget one thing, worse than the mind-sifter, a thing that not even a full Vulcan can withstand unscathed."

"Do you mean...?"

"Yes, I mean the mind-probe. We have to keep in mind that the traitor Sharakan, an agent of the Romulans, must do as he is bidden. If they are desperate to obtain the information..."

Exclamations of indignation ran through the hall. Sarek, white to the lips, could only stammer, "He would not dare! That would be an unforgivable breach of our ethics. No Vulcan would sink to that level of barbarity!"

T'Pau raised a disillusioned eyebrow and replied dryly, "How can you be so sure? The man has already proved his total lack of principles. The question is, Sarek... can we rely on Spock?"

Sarek, for all his secret misgivings, responded to the woman's stare with a stare of defiance. "Whatever happens, T'Pau, I know that my son will not divulge classified data."

A brief pause as they faced one another, then T'Pau said coldly, "So be it." Then, turning with authority to the President, "All the more reason, Sholek, for prompt and decisive action."

Half an hour later an aircar was skimming swiftly over the sleeping town of Shikahr, its headlights picking out shining roofs and treetops. Sitting hunched in the front seat Sarek was staring blindly at the starry night, his mind numb with fatigue and worry. For the moment there was nothing he could do. All the wheels had been set in motion, and all the people concerned were, so to speak, on a war footing.

The whole of Vulcan was under permanent Security supervision, and the search for Spock was in full cry. All that was left for him, for his wife, was to hope for prompt results.

For the present one sole idea haunted his mind. *Let them find him in time!* His iron self control suddenly gave way, and Sarek shivered convulsively.

Sirvann, who was at the controls and had respected his silent reflections, asked at once, "Do you feel the cold, sir? Shall I put on the heat?"

"No, not necessary." Sarek pulled himself upright. "I am not cold, and we are almost there." Then an idea struck his mind. "Tell me, did your sister stay with my wife for the night?"

"No, sir. The Lady Amanda said she did not have to, since T'Mina was there. So, after making sure that Lady Amanda was feeling better, T'Kahalin took her leave and I drove her home before coming for you, sir."

"Good." Sarek paused for thought, and recalled the painful moment when the news of Spock's disappearance had reached the reception room, his wife's horrified expression as she stared at him shock succeeding disbelief on her face when she realised the implications of Sarek's words. Through their mind-link he had calmed her first moment of panic, then had talked her into going home under Sirvann's escort, since there was nothing she could do. T'Kahalin had offered assistance, and had gone along with Amanda on her way home.

Odd, Sarek thought, how T'Kahalin seemed shocked at the news. She did not know Spock, was only introduced today. Curious...

His thoughts were interrupted as the engine was cut off and the aircar landed smoothly at the back of the house.

His secretary pushed the door open and asked, "At what time will you need me tomorrow, sir?"

"I shall let you know. I expect reports to come in early in the morning. You go and have some rest now - it has been a long day. And do not fail, when you see her, to convey my gratitude to your sister," Sarek said, alighting from the aircar.

"Very good, sir. Er... If I may, sir?"

"Yes?"

"If there is anything we can do for Commander Spock, sir, we shall be happy to help."

"I know, Sirvann." With a short nod the Ambassador walked to the house, but on the way he stopped for a split second, then changed course and headed for the side gate to the garden.

Sarek had suddenly felt, in the deepest levels of his mind, a faint stimulation, like a presence trying to call attention to itself, and he realised with a shock that it touched the tenuous bond which still linked him with his son. He strode quickly to the pool and made his way to the mediation garden, a closed area surrounded by high bushes.

Sarek sank down heavily on the circular stone seat, and closing his eyes let his thoughts and worries give way to a receptive state of mind. His anxiety for Spock, the decisions he had to make, the rush and commotion of the day, had somewhat impeded his usually logical reasoning powers, and he had neglected one important factor that might prove valuable in the search for Spock: the parental bond which linked Vulcan children to their parents.

He knew that this bond, kept dormant since Spock's childhood, had never been severed even during their long estrangement, and the day before, during the mindmeld they had shared, both father and son had felt deep in their minds the faint quiver of that bond, still very much alive.

And just now he had felt Spock calling to him, he was certain.

So, in the quiet of the night, he let his thoughts sink into the very depths of his mind and began to activate that long-forgotten bond. For a while there was no reaction to his cautious, tentative probing, then as he insisted he felt a shudder along the link, and again Spock's presence... but so weary, so drained, like a small flame on the point of flickering out. In spite of his efforts Sarek could not obtain any other response but the tenuous evidence that Spock was still alive.

After a few moments Sarek emerged from his trance and walked back home to tell Amanda, determined to make other attempts at contacting Spock and monitoring his presence through the bond.

CHAPTER 9

Spock was still alive, but in a critical state. For the last five hours his body and mind had been subjected to the imaginative and sadistic attentions of his captors. His body ached, and his mind was numb with excruciating pain.

Slumped in the chair to which he was still tightly shackled, his head leaning wearily against the metal frame, Spock was breathing slowly, painfully, and concentrating on controlling the agony in his head. He was dimly aware of his surroundings, of the humming drone of machinery, and voices raised in angry discussion.

As the pain abated slightly the memory of the last few hours drifted back to his mind. He recalled his surprise at finding in this huge cave a perfectly equipped Romulan base, safely ensconced in the remotest range of mountains under the double protection of thousands of metres of rock and a brand new cloaking device. The Romulans had had no compunction about revealing their secret position for as they pointed out, he would not have a chance to tell anyone about it.

Working in league with the Romulans were three Vulcans besides Sharakan, two women and a man who openly admitted their allegiance to the Rihansu Empire. To his dry comment "Indeed", emphasised by a disdainful eyebrow, they had responded with a flow of eloquence on the 'Neo-Vulcan' ideology: admiration for the Pre-Reformation Warriors whose ideals could now be found in their distant cousins the Romulans; hatred for the present Vulcan society and its weak pacifism; and determination to restore the purity of the Vulcan race and cleanse it of the blemishes brought in by the Offworlders.

Spock had heard that kind of fanatical nonsense before. It usually led to totalitarian regimes or sheer terrorism, but he had not expected to find that type of hazy ideology in the logical minds of Vulcans. He flatly told them what he thought about it, and tried to make them realise that unwittingly they were being manipulated by the Romulans, whose sole aim was to expand their Empire and destroy the Federation.

His attempt at counter-propaganda was rewarded with a powerful backhand slap across the face, and hot blood trickling down his chin from his bruised lips. The Romulan leader, having brutally vented his anger on Spock, took charge of the proceedings and declared that he had no more time to waste in senseless talk - he meant to get results, and demanded to be told everything without more ado.

Spock calmly replied that he did not know what they were talking about.

More blows and slaps followed, then, "So you don't know, do you? And Professor Delvaux - does the name mean anything to you?"

"Certainly. Professor Delvaux is one of the foremost scientists of the Federation."

"Don't try to outwit me, Spock," the other warned in a threatening tone. "At this little game, you'll be the loser. Just a few hours ago we received word from our agents on Starbase 10 that you paid a visit to Delvaux, and that he gave you something we want."

No reply. Another backhanded slap. Still no reply.

"Answer, you bastard! We want the data Delvaux gave you. Oh, of course we know you have it, because the old man - after some reluctance at first - spilled the whole story to our agent. Well, he won't tell anything more now!"

Spock stared, horrified, at the men sniggering in front of him,

and a blaze of fury washed over him as the Romulan gloated,

"What happened? Oh, just the usual questioning, Commander. Too bad that being a miserable Human specimen he could not survive our methods. A great loss for Science, wouldn't you say?"

Enraged by such blatant callousness, Spock rushed at the man and caught his neck in his manacled hands. As was to be expected, this illogical display of emotion brought another shower of blows and kicks upon him.

Furious at having been nearly throttled by his prisoner, the Chief snapped to his men, "All right, bring him over here!"

Spock was dragged over and shackled to a chair. The Romulan produced a metal band with attached wires.

"I suppose you know what this is, Spock?" he sneered.

"Indeed. I am familiar with the Klingon stock in trade," Spock replied coolly. "I presume that this is the result of a lucrative barter, the cloaking device for the mindsifter?"

"Don't try to be clever with me, you damn Fed! Give me the formulae, or we'll give you a taste of the mindsifter, which has been greatly improved by our technicians - you'll be reduced to a mere vegetable."

"I believe I have heard that threat already somewhere," Spock murmured as the apparatus was fixed to his head. He barely had time to retreat behind his mind shields before the sifter was turned on at full power.

As a trained Vulcan telepath, Spock was able to disassociate his mind from his brain and block the relentless impulse of the mindsifter. However, the potency of this model had indeed been considerably increased over the one he had experienced on Organia. He had felt his overtaxed brain to be on the verge of shattering when the mindsifter had been abruptly cut off.

Now here he was, still fastened to that lethal apparatus, slowly recovering and satisfied to have once more withstood its effects. The Romulans had wasted their time.

Meanwhile his captors were talking loudly, and by the sound of their voices were quarrelling. From what Spock could gather it appeared that the Romulans' safe departure for their home world had become problematical. He heard with satisfaction that Vulcan was being monitored, and that Security craft were constantly patrolling the planet's surface. The Romulans were secure in their shielded hiding place, but they were trapped in it; they could not get out for fear of detection.

Spock knew that he could rely on his father and the Vulcan authorities to handle the situation efficiently, but the question was, how soon would they find him? He knew also that his brain could sustain more hours of questioning by the mindsifter, painful though it would be; however, how long could he withstand the terrible stress physically? Certainly he had little chance of coming out of this alive - the Romulans would see to that.

Wistfully his thoughts went to his father and mother as they had been, happy together the night before, and to the afternoon

reception at the Academy. It seemed ages ago...

Suddenly a face materialised in his mind... a lovely face... Clear, limpid eyes locked with his own. T'Kahalin... New Dawn... What a fitting name for this girl. There was something special about her, but he would probably never see her again. It was not even worth trying to calculate the odds.

That last thought brought painful memories to his mind: the Enterprise and her Captain, who so often had required his Science Officer to calculate the odds, their chances of success, even of survival.

A sudden wave of hopelessness swept over him. *Jim, shall I ever see you again? My T'hy'la, you are so far away... I cannot reach you.*

Desperately Spock tried to reach out to Jim Kirk, illogical though it might be - he knew well that the distance was far beyond the range of his telepathic ability. Still, he was striving to stir the bond which joined him to Kirk when he was brutally interrupted. His face hurting with the sting of a blow, he opened his eyes and saw Sharakan and the Romulan agent in front of him.

"Wake up, Spock!" barked the Romulan. "We have not finished with you. Now, since your brain seems to resist our mindsifter, we shall try another method, a genuine, guaranteed Vulcan method which - so I am told - has always proved infallible in the past. It is up to you now, Sharakan. Show me your skill, and remember - I want that data now!"

Spock eyed the traitor with misgivings, and his heart sank at the sight of the Vulcan's impassive face and chilly eyes, which expressed nothing but cold hostility. He felt hard fingers fasten on his bruised temples, and shook his head to avoid the contact.

"You won't obtain anything from a mind meld, Sharakan."

"A mind meld? Perhaps not," the other replied dryly, "but I am sure that a forced mind probe, efficiently performed, will bring satisfactory results."

"You would not..."

"Oh yes. And do not think that your mental shields can withstand the combined force of a collective probe, Commander. You will give us the data willingly... or forcibly."

Spock knew that this perverted version of the mind meld, banned from Vulcan since Surak's Reformation, led to mental incapacity and insanity. He fought, trying to pull away from Sharakan's grasp, but the other Vulcans joined in the assault, and he was soon left in no doubt as to their ruthlessness and their determination. While they were already battering at his mental defences he hastily retreated to his lower levels of consciousness, behind secure blocks he grimly set out to defend at all costs. Spock was well aware of the agony in store for him, of the fight he would have to put up, but not only the classified information was at stake but also his own mental integrity and sanity.

As Sharakan, reinforced by the other minds, attacked his shields and he opposed him with stubborn resistance, Spock felt that

this was only the beginning of an inexorable descent into Hell.

Dr. McCoy was in a quandary. Since the news of Professor Delvaux' death had reached their retreat, not a word had been heard from Spock and Jim Kirk was steadily working himself into a state of frantic anxiety.

McCoy had, so far, succeeded in talking him out of renting a private spacecraft to fly to Vulcan, or calling the Vulcan Consulate at the Base. The journey to Vulcan lasted at least three and a half standard days, and what excuse could they offer for barging into Spock's home, or asking for information from the Vulcan officials, since Spock's assignment was top secret? Jim had at last endorsed his view, but had decided to call Spock directly if they did not hear from him before the day was over.

The Doctor watched his friend brooding by the fire. At least he was quiet for the moment, after having prowled restlessly about the room for the last hour or so. Short of giving him a sedative, there was nothing McCoy could do.

He heaved a sigh and turned his attention back to the medical journal which had dropped into his lap. Suddenly a gasp made him look up and stare. Jim was frozen in his chair, with tilted head and tense face, as though listening to a distant and elusive sound. Alarmed by this unnatural rigidity, the Doctor got to his feet and laid a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Jim, are you all right?"

Kirk raised a hand, enjoining silence, then after several minutes, which to McCoy seemed as many hours, he relaxed and sagged in his chair with a dazed look on his face. McCoy ran the ubiquitous scanner over him; nothing serious seemed to be the matter.

With a shuddering sigh Kirk gazed up at the Doctor. "What was it?" McCoy asked quietly.

"Spock..." Kirk whispered. "He called me... I heard him in my mind, Bones. It was Spock."

"Impossible, Jim. You must have been dreaming. Spock's a touch telepath - how could he reach you over the distance? I admit that you two are especially attuned to each other, but still, it's hard to believe that Spock..."

"I don't know, Bones, but it was not a hallucination. It was Spock, I tell you!" Kirk cut in feverishly. "I felt his presence in my mind. I... I think he needs me, Bones. I'll call his home now - I must find out what's happening." The Captain stood up abruptly and strode to their telescreen unit.

However, when Kirk requested a call to Vulcan and gave Sarek's co-ordinates, it seemed after a long delay that the connection was impossible. The operator was sorry, but all communications with Vulcan were interrupted.

McCoy and Kirk exchanged a startled glance, then Kirk called again and asked to be put through to a superior officer. After more delay, unavoidable and frustrating, the screen came back to life

showing the face of a harassed official.

For the umpteenth time he explained the situation. For reasons as yet unknown, all communications and transport between Vulcan and the rest of the galaxy were interrupted until further notice. No explanation had been given for the unprecedented state of affairs.

Concealing his anxiety the Captain replied, "I understand that you have strict instructions, but I must insist. I am James T. Kirk, Captain of the USS Enterprise, presently docked at the Base, and it is imperative for me to contact my First Officer or Ambassador Sarek for reasons related to the present situation on Vulcan. If necessary I shall refer to the Commodore."

The officer hesitated, at once compelled by his orders and overawed by Kirk's reputation. However, when the Captain brought his best quarterdeck manner into play and demanded to be connected immediately with Vulcan Space Central, accepting all responsibility, the Communications Officer finally gave in and said gruffly,

"All right, Captain, I'll see what I can do. Stand by, please."

The battle of wills being over, Kirk let out a long breath and turned to the Doctor. "You see what I mean. This martial law situation must be related to Spock's mission. Something must have gone wrong somewhere, but I can't understand why Spock didn't call me."

McCoy offered all the reasons he could think of to explain Spock's silence, but neither could hide their concern for their mutual friend.

At last the communications signal sounded, and the officer reappeared on the screen to announce formally, "Captain Kirk, you are now directly connected with Vulcan Space central. Please proceed. They will put you through to Ambassador Sarek's residence."

CHAPTER 10

Amanda was sitting in the gallery staring blindly at the pool shimmering beyond the festoons of flowered vines. Only yesterday she had been here watching Spock dive and swim... and now where was he? What had they done to him, those fiends?

Hot tears stung her eyes and ran down her pale cheeks unheeded, and she felt sick at heart with frustration and anguish. After that moment of sheer happiness they had been suddenly thrown into a horrible nightmare from which there seemed to be no escape.

Now she was waiting - the whole household was waiting. Time had come to a standstill, and life seemed to have ceased in Sarek's house. A brief report had come in at daybreak. No definite clues had been found, but traces of unusual activity in the L'Langon southern range had been reported by local dwellers. The search had been concentrated in that area, but nothing had yet come of it.

Amanda's thoughts turned to Sarek, who had spent the night in his study, waiting. Now, after a light breakfast, he had retired to the meditation garden while Sirvann kept watch by the telecom unit

in the study. To Amanda, this waiting was sheer misery, and she fretted at their helplessness.

Suddenly quick footsteps made her turn her head expectantly, and there was her husband's secretary, looking as excited as any Vulcan could. Amanda wiped away her tears and stood up.

"There is a call for Commander Spock," Sirvann said breathlessly. "A call from Captain Kirk."

"Kirk! Oh my god! All right, I'll take it," Amanda said. "Go and tell Sarek, will you - he is in the garden." She ran to the study, sat down at the console, and with trembling fingers pressed the transmitting levers.

Jim Kirk's worried face lit up at the sight of her. "Lady Amanda! How are you? Sorry for intruding, but I've been expecting a call from Spock for some time now, and as I have heard disturbing news... I wondered, could I speak to him, or to Sarek, if they are available?"

"Captain..." Amanda stammered, "Captain... I don't know how to tell you. Spock has been missing since yesterday, and... we haven't heard from him. I'm sorry... I cannot..." Overcome with grief, Amanda turned away to hide her tears, and felt a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"Greetings, Captain." Sarek's voice was as calm as ever. "Pray forgive my wife. This is a hard time for her - for all of us."

On the screen Kirk's face looked white and drawn as he stared at the Ambassador.

"We have reason to believe that Spock has been captured by Romulan agents," Sarek explained. "Besides the life of my son, you know what is at stake, Captain. The Vulcan authorities consider the situation extremely alarming." And Sarek gave a quick account of events.

"Oh my god!" Kirk whispered. "This is worse than I feared. They've got Spock... They'll tear his brain apart! Ambassador, if you will allow me I'll commandeer a full warp power courier, and McCoy and I can be with you within four days to help in the search."

"It would be too late, Kirk, therefore useless," Sarek replied sadly. "Time works against us. You know as well as I do how the Romulans treat their prisoners." Behind the cool Vulcan facade Kirk and McCoy could see pain and a deep feeling for his son.

"I know, Ambassador," Kirk replied, "and I quite understand that the Vulcan authorities are doing their utmost to save Spock, but I have an element of information which might help you. It is something very private. Less than two hours ago I felt a mental contact from Spock."

There followed a few seconds of silence while Sarek and Amanda took in the startling revelation.

"Indeed? I was not aware that you and my son are bonded."

"We're not - at least, not in the sense I believe you to mean. And I'm no telepath. But I have experienced several mental contacts

with Spock - they've sometimes saved my sanity, even my life - and some mind link seems to remain between us. I am positive that Spock has contacted me; I felt his presence."

Sarek and his wife exchanged a meaningful look, then Sarek nodded and turned back to the screen. "What you tell us is very interesting and unprecedented, Captain, and might be important in our predicament. I have twice been in mental contact with my son since his capture; unfortunately, those contacts have been very short. This link you share with Spock could help me reach him; by joining our mental powers we would be more efficient. If you have no objection, Kirk, this is what I propose we should do..."

Ten minutes later, after a short mental preparation, Sarek in ShiKahr and Kirk light years away on Starbase 10 were attempting the impossible, contact with a being lost somewhere on the planet Vulcan.

Sarek, with a mastery born of long practice, and the Captain, unskilled but willing, let out the stream of their thoughts in search of the man they were trying to save. Amanda and the Doctor both watched anxiously, ready to put an end to the experiment should the need arise. They had only a small chance of success, but as Kirk put it, it was worth taking the risk.

At first, nothing happened. Kirk felt frustrated, as though he was groping in the dark. He concentrated his thoughts on his friend, at the same time letting his mind open to the slightest tremor which might come, as Sarek had instructed. But still he felt nothing, just a horrible void.

Then gradually he got the impression that he was not alone in that barren space; a presence touched his mind, searching with him, a reassuring strength at his side.

Sarek, he thought, relieved to have a companion in that emptiness, and instantly he received an acknowledging touch from the Vulcan.

Led by Sarek's bond the quest went on, for how long Kirk never knew. And then, a shock. Hopeful relief invaded both Vulcan and Human minds. At last, like a distant glimmer in the darkness, they perceived a familiar presence, familiar but strangely aloof and entrenched behind apparently impregnable barriers.

With his Human impulsiveness Kirk rushed ahead. *\\Spock! Spock, it's Jim. Answer me!*

No response, just a disturbing feeling of hostility and anger. Kirk, not to be put off, tried again with the support of Sarek's masterful mind.

\\Spock, don't keep us out. Spock, it's Jim.

\\Spock, my son, listen.

For what seemed an age their joint minds tried to reach out to Spock, silent in his mental retreat. Kirk was becoming desperate. Was it really Spock? Why this hostile silence? This was so unlike the gentle touch he loved to feel in their mind melds.

Then at last, a faltering touch. *\\Father? Jim? My t'hy'la?*

\\Yes, Spock, yes. This is Jim. Come on.

\\Spock, my son, give me your thoughts. Tell me where you are.

\\I... I am not sure. In a cavern... room with computers. I... I cannot tell... No! I won't tell...

Then, as if the impregnable walls had been suddenly breached, a wave of pain and anguish washed over Sarek and his companion as they found themselves in contact with Spock's tortured mind. Almost immediately the surge of emotion vanished, blocked by steely self control. But, what a shock! This spirit, this brilliant mind, offered a sight of destruction, a battlefield strewn with dreadful marks of ruthless assaults and heroic defence. Behind battered shields however, a strong memory block stood as yet unconquered.

Aghast, Kirk gasped, *\\Oh my god! Spock, tell us.. .what happened?*

A weary sigh. *\\I am... being questioned. They are very... persistent... Probe... Hard to bear, but they will obtain... nothing... nothing... Father... must keep my dignity... One logical thing left... for me...*

\\Don't, Spock! Sarek cut in forcefully. *\\Don't do that. We shall find you. Hold on until we find you.*

\\... shall try... but... too late...

\\Spock! Kirk shouted, his heart wrung with grief. *\\Spock, what do you mean to do? Stay... I need you, Spock.*

Suddenly a frantic appeal. *\\Jim! Father! Go away! Leave me, now! Go... quickly!*

An evil presence approached, and prowled ominously around as Spock's mental shields slammed back into place. As if caught in a nightmare, Kirk heard a terrible scream of agony, then found himself snatched away and irresistibly sped along in a dark void while the deadly struggle raged behind him. He had a vague feeling of Sarek's solid presence, and then he lost consciousness.

Sarek broke the meld and reopened his eyes to find his wife hovering anxiously over him. He took a deep breath, and reading deep concern in her blue eyes said quietly,

"I have reached Spock. He is alive, but my wife, I shall not hide the truth. Spock is in grave danger, and I intend to take prompt action with the agreement of the High Council."

"But Sarek, what can you do?" Amanda cried. "You still don't know where he is, do you?"

"No, not quite, but an idea came to my mind as I linked with Kirk, and we must hurry. Let us call Kirk again."

The Vulcan sat at the communications console and swiftly

punched a few numbers. A grumpy face appeared on the screen.

"Yes, who is calling? Oh, it's you, Ambassador," McCoy said curtly. "If it's Jim you want, I'll ask you to wait a moment until he recovers. I don't know what kind of jaunt you've taken him on, but he came back on the verge of collapse, and... No, Jim!" the Doctor said sharply. "Now you just stay where you are. You're in no state yet to wander around..."

But to no avail. Unwillingly, the Doctor let Jim Kirk take his place at the telecom. The Captain's face was white and drawn.

"I regret, Captain, having subjected you to an unpleasant experience," said the Ambassador.

"Unpleasant!" Kirk laughed bitterly at the memory. "Such horror, such agony - it felt like a bad dream."

"Alas, it is not. From what I sensed through that contact, it is obvious that as I feared Spock is being subjected to prolonged mental harassment. At first they probably used a mechanical device, such as the mindsifter, but now I am sure that they have resorted to a more efficient kind of torture which is, I regret to say, a relic of our wild past. I felt in Spock's consciousness the presence of a very determined, very unscrupulous being, and my son has had to summon all his inner strength to resist such an outrageous violation of his mind. But even so..." Sarek shook his head despondently.

"What do you mean?" Kirk stammered.

"Captain, a collective forced mindmeld normally ruins the victim's mind beyond repair. Spock is well aware of the risk he incurs. So I fear that, besides the necessity of keeping the formulae secret, he will decide to save his mind from damage unacceptable to a Vulcan and will therefore take drastic measures by ending his life."

"Is that what he meant when he spoke of the logical thing to do?"

"Exactly, Captain. A Vulcan would choose death rather than indignity. Unless we can save him, Spock will choose to die with dignity. He knows the appropriate techniques and death rituals."

"But Sarek," Kirk exploded, "can't you do something? What have your Security Forces been doing all this time? Aren't your sensors any good at all?"

Sarek merely gazed calmly at Kirk, allowing him time to cool down. His personal experiences with a Human wife had long since taught him that arguing with emotional Humans was a sheer waste of time. This policy proved once more to be effective. After a few seconds of inner struggle Kirk had regained his control and rather sheepishly apologised.

"I beg your pardon, Ambassador. I'm afraid I lost my temper."

"There is no need for apologies, Kirk," Sarek replied serenely. "Your outburst is understandable... in a Human. You are quite affected by my son's predicament, I can see."

"He is my First Officer and my friend, the best a man could ever have. He has saved my life time and again, and should I lose

him..." Kirk's voice broke and he lowered his head.

"This close link you have with my son may still be of use, Captain. I believe there is another possibility."

Having obtained everyone's full attention, Sarek continued in his cool, precise way. "Let me explain. According to the last report I have just received, our sensor scans and air patrols have produced one positive clue, which confirms information received. Suspicious activities, hitherto undetected, have been observed in the L'Langon Mountains. Logically we assume that Romulan agents have a secret base in that area, in which they are probably keeping Spock prisoner. Remember also that in our mindlink Spock mentioned a cavern, and those mountains are honeycombed with caves."

"At last we're getting somewhere! We have facts," Kirk declared. "So now what are we waiting for? I wish I had my ship and my Security squad at hand. These Romulans would see..."

"Captain, the L'Langon range covers an area equivalent to the Rocky Mountains on your planet, and it would be impossible to detect the one cave we are looking for with any probing equipment, because of magnetic interference due to the nature of the rocks. What is more, any frontal attack on the enemy base would have but one result: the immediate death of Spock."

"Yes, of course," Kirk acknowledged despondently. "But you mentioned another possibility?"

"Precisely, Captain. There is still one last resort. Where modern techniques fail, traditional mental powers may succeed."

Sarek briefly explained what he had in mind and what he planned to do to Kirk, McCoy and the now hopeful Amanda, and concluded with, "In the meantime, Kirk, I would ask you to leave your mind open to any possible contact from Spock. Do not try to reach him - you are no telepath, and it would be dangerous without the guidance of an expert. Just be ready and accessible. And should Spock contact you, please do your utmost to keep him from sacrificing his life. Now I must go and have everybody ready. Please, stand by, and we shall call you as soon as possible."

The communication was cut off and the two friends were left staring at one another in wonder.

"My word!" breathed McCoy. "This is incredible - truly fantastic. Do you think it will work, Jim?"

"It will, Bones. It must. This is our last chance. You know what the mental abilities of the Vulcans are like, and there are many things we don't know yet. Remember Spock - and *he's* half Human."

"Sure. You know, Jim, I see now where that pointy-eared phenomenon, for all his logical primness, gets his preposterous notions. It's from Sarek, you can be sure. Those Vulcans are really special, you must admit. A collective mindmeld - the whole of ShiKahr to the rescue! Isn't that something?"

Kirk, in high spirits now and amused by McCoy's enthusiasm, grinned in reply. "I know they're special, Bones, and I want the most special of them safely back on the bridge with us. Now I'd better relax and be ready, in case Spock..."

"And just in case, I'll watch over you like... like a..."

The Doctor being lost for words, his friend supplied them for him. "Like a mother hen, of course, as usual!"

Another hour had gone by, and Dr. McCoy was now on the verge of discouragement. The telecom remained obstinately silent, and there was Kirk lying on the couch, slowly recovering from another mindlink with Spock, as distressing to the performer as to the viewer. Helplessly the Doctor had had to watch his friend shake with grief and mumble ominously significant snatches of sentences. At last Kirk had broken down in tears, and McCoy had given him a sedative and forced him to lie down.

What could he do to help Jim, to save Spock? McCoy paced the room back and forth and clenched his fists in sheer frustration.

"What are they doing, for heaven's sake? Why don't they hurry?"

At last a familiar buzz made him start, and sent him running to the telecom. An anonymous face appeared on the screen.

"This is Vulcan Space Central. There is a call for Captain Kirk. Is he available?"

"Yes, yes, he's here. I am McCoy. Put us through, man. What are you waiting for, dammit?"

"Hold the line." The Vulcan's cold, disapproving face vanished, and after some interference Sarek's sober face came into focus against the background of what appeared to be a large vaulted hall.

"Dr. McCoy, we are about to begin. Did my son communicate with Kirk within the last hour?"

"Yes, he did," replied Kirk, who had managed to get to his feet and the call and had joined McCoy. "He is in great pain, but still holding on, as far as I can tell. But now I'm sure he can't take much more of that mind probe, Sarek. He's bound to reach breaking point. His sanity is at stake. Please hurry."

"I know, Kirk. We are ready. If you wish, you can join your thoughts to ours. We are in the Academy auditorium. All these people are volunteers who have come to support the stream of thought of those of us who have melded with Spock and are familiar with his mental patterns. Moreover, this attempt is being broadcast all over the planet so that anyone can help us to pinpoint Spock's exact location. Now, let us begin."

Sarek stepped back, and Kirk and McCoy received a shock at the view of the crowded auditorium. Hundreds of Vulcans were standing close together surrounding a small group on the stage in their midst.

"Good lord!" McCoy whispered in awe. "Look at that! And Jim, do you see who's there, right beside Sarek and Amanda? T'Pol herself, in all her glory. Fancy her being there!"

"Well, isn't she the Head of the Clan? And she formed the

mindmeld with Spock on his wedding day, remember?"

"I'm not likely to forget!" the Doctor replied with feeling. "I wonder who the others are. That old couple, for instance - and that man looks like Sarek, doesn't he?"

"They must be relatives or friends, I guess," Kirk replied. "Now they're beginning, I think."

The two friends watched silently, somewhat surprised by the lack of ritual or ceremony. People were just standing quietly, most with their eyes shut. But the depth of their concentration was almost tangible, as though the very atmosphere of the hall was crackling with unbearable tension. Though they were parsecs from that hall the two Humans were as deeply moved as if they were in communion, sharing the unique feeling of belonging to one powerful mind that was reaching out, searching for one single but so precious Vulcan.

How long did the trance last? Afterwards, neither of them could tell. It seemed that time had come to a standstill.

Suddenly a shudder ran through the hall. All eyes opened, people stirred, and Sarek, after a few words to his wife and T'Pau, rushed out gathering a young man and three uniformed officers on the way. Then the circle reformed around the small group presided over now by T'Pau, and the mindmeld was resumed.

"What happened? What are they doing now? I wish they would tell us," McCoy complained.

As if on cue the view of the auditorium faded, to be replaced by Amanda, a pale-faced Amanda whose shining eyes spoke volumes.

"Captain, Doctor, they have found Spock. We know exactly where the cave is located."

"Thank god. That's wonderful news," Kirk said with a sigh of relief. "I suppose Sarek has left to go and rescue Spock?"

"Yes, he is going with a squad of Security officers, but there should not be any trouble. The Romulans will be neutralised at a distance."

"What do you mean, neutralised?"

"Captain," Amanda lowered her voice, "I know it is hard to realise the full potential of Vulcans' psionic powers, for they never talk about it - it is very private. But the collective psychic energy which has located Spock will now paralyse his jailers before any harm can be done. I only hope that it isn't too late... But I must leave you now. We will call you as soon as we have any news."

As the screen went blank McCoy let out a long breath and got to his feet. "By Jove, they did it, Jim! They did it. You know, I take back whatever I've said against the Vulcans right now!"

"You might as well, Bones. I've never experienced anything like that. But like Amanda, I only hope that Sarek will arrive in time."

"He will, Jim, don't worry. He'll bring Spock back to us safe

and sound, I'm sure. Remember how many times we've thought Spock was lost and would never come back alive, and he always did? He'll make it, Jim, never fear. And now, what about a drink? I think this calls for a brandy, don't you?"

CHAPTER 11

Though he would never admit it, Ambassador Sarek was badly shaken. He was sitting on the floor of his aircar, which his secretary was flying at breakneck speed to the Medical Complex of ShiKahr. The fact that his behaviour hardly befitted the Plenipotentiary Ambassador of Vulcan did not concern him at the moment. Actually, he could not care less. Sarek was sitting on the floor with the still unconscious body of his son cradled in his arms.

How heavy the dark head felt on his arm, he thought as he gazed at the pale and wasted face, marked with burns and greenish bruises still oozing blood. Panting breath and stifled moans escaped from the parched lips. Obviously Spock could no longer control pain, or enter a healing trance. Some functions of his brain had been impaired, but to what extent? Would the damage be irreversible? Sarek shuddered at the thought.

He slipped a hand under Spock's torn tunic, feeling for his heart, and was shocked at the erratic heartbeat pounding under his hand. At the sight of the deep cuts on the wrists, and the bruises on Spock's body, gruesome evidence of the rough handling he had undergone, Sarek felt another blaze of anger burn in his heart as it had done half an hour ago when they had found Spock in the cave. He was still haunted by the sight that had met his eyes when the Security squad had stormed the Romulan secret base.

They had blown open the sheeted door and rushed into the cave, where a deadly silence reigned. The rocky floor was strewn with unconscious bodies knocked out by the tremendous mental shock their brains had received.

Fearing the worst, Sarek and Sirvann had searched and finally discovered Spock lying on his face, his manacled hands still tightly clenched around the throat of a man crushed under him. With some difficulty they had loosened his grip, and found that the man was Sharakan, half-strangled by his desperate victim.

Leaving the squad to deal with their prisoners, and the precious information found in the cave, Sarek had gathered Spock's unconscious body in his arms, and with Sirvann's help had carried him out to his aircar.

As soon as they were under way the secretary had sent a message to Amanda, who was waiting at the Academy, while Sarek initiated a mindmeld with Spock to ascertain his mental condition; but such was the stunning pain and anguish that had hit him all at once, that Sarek had recoiled immediately and broken the meld.

Now Sarek decided to make another attempt. Naturally, professional Healers were better equipped than he was to evaluate the damage done by the deep probe, but at least, if only to assuage his misery, he could help Spock to control the pain somehow.

Sarek first prepared himself, bringing all his control into

play; then placing his fingers on Spock's face he gently initiated the meld. As he cautiously explored that mind bruised beyond imagining, Sarek again sustained wave after wave of strong emotion: pain; revulsion; grief; all provoked by the ruthless intruders who had violated Spock's privacy.

Progressing with care, and protected by his inner strength, Sarek calmly set about soothing and healing, replacing the agonising emotions with serenity and hope. He perceived that the memory blocks which Spock had fiercely defended were still undamaged; the classified data had been safeguarded, but... at what a price! Sarek thought bitterly.

By and by, his mental pain subsiding somewhat, Spock's consciousness took notice of the calm presence within, and tentatively, wearily, reached out for contact.

\\Who... who is... there? Jim...?

Once again his first thoughts are for Kirk, Sarek observed to himself. Interesting. Then, \\Spock, it is Sarek. Come, Spock.

Surprise, then contentment. \\Sarek? Father? You are... with me?

A surge of relief invaded Sarek. Spock knew him; his sanity seemed intact. He replied, *\\ Yes, it is Sarek, to bring you back. All is well now, Spock. Come with me.*

A deep feeling of relief filled Spock's mind as gently but firmly his father led him back to full awareness, away from fear and despair. When he knew that it was time Sarek gently interrupted the telepathic contact and watched Spock open his eyes, and after some confusion focus a questioning gaze on his father.

"Everything is under control, Spock," Sarek said quietly. "We are taking you to the hospital now. Your wounds need to be looked after."

Too weary to utter a word, Spock nodded in acceptance, and quietly relaxed in the comfort of his father's arms. *As if it was the natural thing to do*, thought the Ambassador, at once touched and amused at the novelty of the situation. What would Amanda think if she knew?

They were approaching the town when Spock stirred and put a hand to his throbbing brow as though trying to recall elusive memories. Opening his eyes, he suddenly realised where he was and struggled to sit up.

"Sir," he gasped, his voice hoarse with pain, "my apologies."

"Easy, Spock, do not move. You are still very weak."

"I am... all right... now."

Sarek helped him to a sitting position and reached for a locker which was stocked with food and water for long distance travel across the desert. He gave Spock a drink of cold water, which was gratefully savoured to the last drop.

Spock looked around and winced as pain stabbed again at his temples. "I must see Stolar," he pronounced with an effort. "There

is... not a moment to lose."

"Yes, indeed. But you must have medical treatment first."

"No, Father, no!" replied Spock, suddenly greatly perturbed. "I must... give him the formulae... now. I must... accomplish my mission... You understand... my duty..."

"Certainly." Sarek's voice was pouring balm on raw nerves. "But there is no more risk of espionage now, therefore no hurry. When your wounds have been properly dressed then we shall meet Stolar, and..."

"No! I must... do it... now!" Spock sounded desperately determined.

So great was his distress that his father thought it best to humour him. He gave Sirvann instructions to call Stolar's office and inform him of their immediate arrival at the Science Academy. Then turning back to his son he asked in a low voice, "Spock, why? Explain. Why such urgency?"

Spock, his face buried in his shaking hands, was desperately fighting to gather his mental controls. At last, looking up at his father, he said in a strained voice, "Acting under secret orders... I have memorised that data... and have kept them safe... under adverse circumstances... but now my mind is so confused... I fear to lose my memory..."

"Your mind has indeed been badly injured, but we will leave it to the Healers, my son. They will examine you, and decided on the therapy suitable for your case, unprecedented as it is."

"If it is not hopeless, you mean," Spock murmured wearily. "That is why it is imperative for me... to deliver... these formulae to Stolar... while I am still able... to do so. It cannot wait. After enduring so much... to fail in my mission now would be more... than I could bear."

Professor Stolar and his team were waiting outside the door of the Bio-Science Section when the aircar landed in front of them. The scientists all but lost their Vulcan composure when they saw the haggard and ragged figure helped out of the car by the Ambassador and his secretary. Stolar restrained an exclamation of dismay as he and his colleagues rushed to give their assistance. Spock had insisted on walking, but he knew that but for the firm grip of Sarek and Sirvann he would have collapsed.

"We are all thankful to see you safe among us at last," Stolar said. "My computer is ready for you, if you feel well enough..."

"Thank you, Professor." Spock's voice was harsh with fatigue. "It has been ready... for some time, I know. My apologies for having kept you... waiting."

Stolar raised an eyebrow. "The delay was not of your doing, Commander, rather that of a man who betrayed my trust. I regret that you had to suffer for his duplicity and criminal actions."

No more was said on the subject, and Spock was taken to Stolar's laboratory without more ado. As they entered the building

Sarek looked around and observed quietly,

"This section seems very crowded for this time of day. Is it usual?"

"No indeed," Stolar's thin lips curved in the semblance of a smile, "but rumours run fast in this place. They have heard of your arrival, and I could do nothing to prevent them from paying tribute to your son."

Sarek looked surprised. "Professor, Spock did nothing but his duty."

"True, Ambassador, but he did it remarkably well!" retorted Stolar with a meaningful glance, and he made his way through the crowded corridor, followed by an inscrutable but secretly gratified Ambassador.

Stolar ushered Spock into his laboratory and shut the door behind him. Only his close assistants were allowed to attend. Sarek went and stood beside Spock, who was already sitting at the console of the central computer.

Spock had managed to get this far through sheer will power and now, with his eyes closed, he had gone into deep concentration to bring the precious data back to the upper levels of consciousness.

Everything went according to plan. As the scientists stood by watching the screen with rapt attention Spock, slowly at first then with practised ease, ran his fingers over the keyboard and logged in Professor Delvaux's formulae, which simultaneously flashed up on the screen. Only twice was the steady data processing interrupted when Spock, overcome by a surge of pain, had to take a rest, but he proceeded grimly with stubborn determination, although his aching head felt as though it was bursting. He was not going to give up now, after what he had suffered.

At last the final equations and figures were logged in and Spock indulged in the satisfaction of a finishing touch as he keyed, 'Log entry completed.' Then he rose to his feet and, looking at Sarek said,

"Father, will you tell my Captain that 'The goods have been delivered.' He will know what it means..."

And Spock quietly pitched forward in a dead faint.

CHAPTER 12

"Staurak, go and help Spock, will you? He is not strong enough to carry that chair."

"Of course, my lady," the old man replied, and hurried along the gallery to catch up with the slender figure clad in a light robe who was slowly walking to the garden.

Amanda watched her son's progress with a wry smile, and was not surprised when, being dispossessed of the chair, he turned around and said,

"Really, Mother, I can manage by myself now. I don't need help

any longer."

Amanda shook her head. "Spock, you are not reasonable. You know what the Healer said. 'No exertion.' Be patient for a few more days, until you recover your strength. You still need rest, my dear."

"I know, Mother. I beg forgiveness." It was said so much in the tone of a chided boy that Amanda was in no doubt that she was being gently teased.

All the same, she could not help but notice that her son was becoming rather impatient at her constant motherly attentiveness, and she reluctantly realised that now he would not accept her ministrations so readily.

Actually, the events of the last few days had roused in Amanda a turmoil of contradictory emotions. After rejoicing at Spock's rescue she had been shocked beyond words at the sight of her son's wasted and bruised body when they had brought him home from the Medical Centre; and when Sarek had told her the ghastly story of the cave she had been revolted by what Spock had endured, and also very proud of his courage.

Then, for all the anxiety she had felt for his condition, she had resumed with relish her role of nurse and mother, and had fussed over Spock even more freely than when he was a child. He had allowed her and T'Mina to dress his injuries, comfort and feed him, as he was too weak to do so by himself.

But now his Vulcan stamina was overcoming his weakness, thanks to the Healers' care and the devotion of the household, and Spock was making a spectacular recovery. So naturally with the steady restoration of his health he gently fended off his mother's loving attentions, and she had to accept the situation in a Vulcan way.

All these considerations were going through her mind as she went to Sarek's study. She quietly opened the door and looked in.

"Are you busy?"

"I am, but it can wait. Come in, my wife." Sarek pushed aside the documents he was studying and looked searchingly at his wife as she went straight to the window and peered out into the garden, looking for something, or someone. "You are preoccupied, Amanda, and it is about Spock," he stated calmly.

"I am, my dear." She turned round with a sigh and sat down beside her husband. "I know... His health is improving, he has more appetite now, and the long hours he spends in the pool, as the Healers recommended, are doing him a lot of good. But I am still worried. For instance... He still suffers from horrible nightmares which leave him exhausted in the morning. And there is something else. I find him withdrawn, depressed, as though shut away in a world of his own. I wonder if the cure is as effective as the Healers claim it to be?"

"My wife, Spock's brain has been healed - it has regained its full potential - but his spirit has not yet overcome the mental shock. Damage to the mind takes longer to heal than physical injury. Keep in mind that by all accounts with the mental harassment Spock has undergone he could have lost his sanity, if not his life."

"Yes, I know," Amanda murmured. "My poor son... How we ever got him back alive... It is little short of a miracle."

"The Healers - and I concur with them - attribute his survival not to any extraneous phenomenon, my dear wife, but to the illogical and unexpected reaction of his dual nature."

"Illogical, Sarek?" Amanda protested. "I see nothing illogical in the fact that Spock reacted with the courage and devotion to duty he has always shown."

"You misunderstand me, Amanda. I have as high an opinion of Spock's total commitment as you have. He has given another proof of it under extremely adverse circumstances. That is not the point. What I mean is that normally a full Vulcan, and a Human still more, would have had his mind utterly and permanently damaged. So we assume that his survival, physical and mental, is due to his combined genetic inheritance, which has endowed him with this exceptional resilience."

Amanda took her husband's hand in her own and laughed softly. "Do you mean, my dear husband, that Spock survived the forced mindmeld because of the two of us?"

Sarek nodded assent, and Amanda went on, "In other words, it appears that Spock saved his life and his mental faculties because of the considerable degree of obstinacy, not to say stubbornness, that he has inherited from his parents?"

Sarek looked mildly shocked, but seeing her blue eyes twinkling he responded accordingly. "Obstinacy? Stubbornness? I admit that I have, on occasions, detected such Human shortcomings in my loving wife, but I am not aware of being likewise affected."

"You may not be aware of it, my dear, but you have your full share of stubbornness, and so has Spock. Human shortcomings, indeed! Should we not rather call it Vulcan tenacity?" Amanda asked with a smile. Then, "Forgive me, my husband, for teasing you, but it is so good to know that we have given Spock not only the best of ourselves, but also this... whatever you wish to call it... which made him survive and triumph over a desperate situation. Is that not something to be thankful for?"

"Indeed, it is most gratifying. For his sake, and for ours. Now the subversive activities of the Romulan agents and their informers have been quelled on our planet; all the members of the terrorist network have been arrested; and the fact that the Romulan Empire has failed in its attempt to take possession of the data carried by Spock has saved the Federation from a considerable danger."

"I had not realised that so much was at stake, Sarek; that so much rested on Spock," Amanda said. "But you mentioned that his specific nature enabled him to succeed where another would have failed. How do we know whether his unique duality will not operate again in other circumstances? I mean, it opens the way to inconceivable possibilities, doesn't it?"

"I would recommend you not to let your imagination run away with you, Amanda. But yes, it is an interesting perspective. Who knows what he may not be able to accomplish when the Vulcan and the Human in him reach their full potential. He is quite unpredictable sometimes."

"However, for the present he has to overcome this depression, the obvious outcome of the severe trauma his mind has suffered, and I feel, in our mental exercises together, that he cannot yet accept even the memory of this violation. He recoils at the very thought, and feels ashamed for what another has done to him. Since he was in no way responsible, this reaction seems quite unreasonable."

"Perhaps unreasonable, Sarek," Amanda remarked sadly, "but oh, very understandable. The victim of a rape usually feels very ashamed and degraded, although it is no fault of hers. It must also be true for the rape of a personality, don't you think?"

"You may be right, my wife. Indeed, to a Vulcan the very idea of an intrusion into the privacy of one's mind is the highest abomination, the rape of one's innermost self. A Vulcan, however, would deal logically with the situation; that Spock reacts so emotionally must be due to his Human heritage."

"How can you be so sure, Sarek?"

"It is the logical explanation, my wife. However, Spock must resolve this problem in his own unique way, as he has resolved the problems of his difference in the past."

"I wish I knew what to do to help him," Amanda sighed wistfully.

"Nothing more than you are already doing, my wife. Your love and patience are all he needs, and the regular mental exercises should soon bring satisfactory results."

"Let us hope so," concluded Amanda, rising to her feet. "Thank you, my dear, for sharing my worries." She went to the door, but paused and turned as a thought crossed her mind.

"Sarek, you never told me the reason T'Pau gave for paying a visit to Spock at the Medical Centre."

"You should know by now that T'Pau never gives, and need not give, any reason for her actions," Sarek replied. "I assume that, being the Head of our Clan, she felt it her duty."

"Really?" Amanda looked pleasantly surprised. "And did she say anything to him?"

"No. Spock was in a deep healing trance when she came. But she mindlinked with him for a few seconds."

"Did she? I wonder what came of it?"

"All she said to me when leaving was, 'He has been sorely tried, but he has not been found wanting.'"

"Is that praise, Sarek? From T'Pau?"

"I should say it is," Sarek said with some satisfaction. He privately thought that T'Pau had acknowledged that his trust in his son had been justified.

Reclining on the lounge chair which Staurak had set in a shady arbour in the garden, Spock was drowsily skimming through a

scientific publication from the Vulcan Academy. He was tired and found it hard to concentrate on his reading as his thoughts wandered restlessly.

This was quite upsetting. His mind, the perfect tool he had been accustomed to use simultaneously on a variety of subjects, was now haunted by the same recurring memories. Even long periods of meditation had done little to assuage his depression.

Spock assumed that this illogical, emotional state was the doing of his tiresome Human half, which had surfaced with a vengeance when the Vulcan had been too shaken to command. Or was it his Vulcan pride which could not get over these feelings of shame and revulsion?

Spock was somehow taken back to his childhood, when he had been taught the hard way how to control his emotions. He had buried them so deep, he had built his barriers so high, to reach the cool, logical Vulcan-ness of his father. And yet now he felt that his two conflicting natures were both plunged into an exhausting torment.

"Art thee Vulcan, or art thee Human?" T'Pol had asked him some years ago.

Alas, he reflected bitterly, he was neither and he was both, and he was cursed with the shortcomings of both heritages.

He recalled how bewildered he had been, as a child, to realise that he was different from his peers. He had learned to cope with that difference in order to survive. And now he had to fight that battle again. How illogical and tedious!

Feeling tired and rather dispirited, Spock closed his eyes and let his head fall back on the pillow. Bittersweet memories of his childhood that he had believed buried in the deep levels of his soul were now emerging into his consciousness, succeeding each other in a rapid kaleidoscope.

Presently the book slipped from Spock's loose fingers and dropped with a soft thud onto the sand, and in the stillness of the garden only the gentle babble of the cascade in the pool, and the rhythmic steady breathing of the sleeping man in the arbour, could be heard.

The boy was standing at attention on the carpet in his father's study listening to the reprimand being delivered by his stern parent, whose displeasure had made itself felt more than once of late.

"... and do me the courtesy of looking at me when I speak to you, Spock."

"Yes, Father." Head raised, hands clasped behind his back.

"This shocking display of anger is indecent and unworthy of a true Vulcan. By showing this unacceptable emotion you disgrace our family. Let it be the last time I have to say this. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Father."

"I have not yet heard your apology."

"I beg forgiveness, Father."

"Hmm... For now, you will be deprived of supper. And do not show yourself until tomorrow. You may go now."

The child shot a beseeching glance at his mother, whose tearful eyes were watching him sadly, but she silently shook her head. No hope there.

Choking back his tears he blindly made for the door and ran out into the garden, to his favourite asylum hidden from prying eyes under a clump of bushes. Presently I-Chaya came bouncing along, and Spock gladly buried his face in his sehlat's thick, golden fur and poured into its ear the sad tale of his disgrace.

As usual the comfort he found in his playmate worked like a charm, and soon the two of them were engaged in a merry rough-and-tumble, a game which unavoidably resulted in the child pinned down by a mighty paw while his face was thoroughly licked from his chin to the tips of his pointed ears.

Trying to push the huge head away, the boy cried laughingly, "Stop it, I-Chaya! Don't... I-Chaya, stop!"

Spock awoke with a start to the sound of a child's voice crying shrilly, "Stop! Stop it, I say!" and to the odd sensation of a heavy weight lying across his body. Something wet and raspy was running back and forth across his face and bare chest. So... it was not a dream?

Wide awake now, Spock opened his eyes and found himself face to face with a brown furry head adorned with shining white fangs. A deep rumbling purr, expressing the animal's affection, added to the illusion, but... it was not I-Chaya.

Pushing up the big jaw, Spock managed to get some breathing space, and discovered two young children, a boy and a tiny girl, hanging onto the sehlat's tail and pulling away for all they were worth.

Bemused by this incongruous sight, and weighed down by the heavy beast, he gathered his strength and pushed. With the children still pulling on the tail the three of them finally succeeded in putting the animal back on the ground, where it expressed its disapproval with a roar.

"Be silent, Cham!" the boy said sternly to his pet. "You are naughty today. Be quiet." Then addressing Spock with a graceful formality, "I beg forgiveness, sir, for my sehlat. He ran away from home and went through a gap in the fence, and we looked for him, and..."

"No apology is needed, child," Spock replied mildly as he swung his legs down and sat on the edge of the couch. Then, conscious of the curious eyes watching him, and of his somewhat dishevelled appearance, he hastened to straighten his gaping robe, tighten his belt and smooth his dark hair which had been ruffled by the sehlat's attentions.

When he was more presentable Spock eyed the young intruders in silent query. The boy, suddenly recalling his manners, raised a hand, fingers parted, in salute.

"Greetings, sir. I am Serik, and she is T'Chal, my little sister, and this is Cham, my sehlat."

At a nudge from her brother the girl obediently raised her chubby little hand, fingers dutifully parted. "Greetings," she piped.

Spock, deadpan, replied likewise, "Greetings. My name is Spock."

The children's formality vanished at once, replaced with bright-eyed excitement. "Spock? Commander Spock of Starfleet?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you wear your uniform?"

"Because I am on shore leave at the moment. But how do you know me?"

"Father spoke about you, sir. We live at the house with the big blue door, down the street."

"I see. And this is Cham," Spock mused, laying a hand on the brow of the loudly purring sehlat sprawled at his feet, and feeling in the mental contact with the animal the same blind devotion as in his own pet so many years ago.

"Yes, sir. He is two years old. But I don't understand," said Serik. "I don't know why he came here. He likes you. He has never done that before with other people."

"I believe Cham senses that when I was your age I also had a sehlat."

"Oh? What was his name?"

"I-Chaya. He was a little bigger than Cham, and much older. He died long ago..." Odd, how the memory of the tragic death of his pet still hurt. "He died up in the mountains, fighting a le-matya to protect me."

The children exchanged a delighted glance. A le-matya! They had, of course, heard of the dangerous beasts that roamed the desert, and were very impressed by the tale.

"Do you have a sehlat to protect you on your Starship?" the boy asked, sitting beside his pet, who was still purring like a cat.

"No," replied Spock, keeping a straight face, "there would be no place for him. But we have other means of defence..."

When, some time later, Amanda brought Spock his daily tonic drink, an unexpected sight met her eyes. Her son was sitting at ease on the couch, hands loosely clasped between his knees, and he was quietly talking to two wide-eyed children who were sitting at his feet comfortably propped against the flank of a sleeping

sehlat. The children were listening with rapt attention to the exploits of a Captain James T. Kirk leading a daring landing party to explore a strange planet at the end of the galaxy.

"Hello," she said, breaking the spell. "We have visitors."

The children scrambled to their feet and saluted with the inborn grace of their people.

"Indeed," Spock explained. "It seems that their pet ran loose, broke through a fence... and their search led them here."

"And so Serik and T'Chal are keeping you company, I see. Very nice. Here is your medicine, Spock, but what about cold drinks for everyone?" Amanda asked smilingly.

Both childrens' eyes sparkled assent.

"Just stay here, my dears, I won't be a moment." Amanda went off briskly for refreshments.

A wonderful idea had just sprung into her mind. She had been struck by Spock's changed expression as he talked to his young visitors. The tension, the haunted look in his eyes seemed to have gone, and she realised that besides the practice of severe mental techniques what he needed was some diversion, and company.

These two little neighbours were perfectly well behaved, and taken in small quantities their company would be beneficial, but some mild activity, some quiet family gatherings, could also provide a valuable therapy for Spock. Amanda had some people in mind - one in particular. All she needed was to obtain Sarek's approval, and the agreement of the person concerned.

CHAPTER 13

In the later afternoon Spock was sitting in the meditation garden, hands joined in the position of inner mental search. His dark eyes were fixed on the green stones set in symbolic patterns on the raked sand, and he was gradually emerging from a long introspection. The mental rituals he had observed for the last two hours had brought him, at last, some kind of serenity.

A succession of rippling notes, dropping like musical pearls into the silence, attracted his awakening attention. He raised his head and listened, and recognised the liquid sounds of a Vulcan harp.

Who is playing? he wondered. *It cannot be Sarek - he has not yet returned from ShiKahr. Or... has he?*

Listening intently, Spock detected the skill of an artist in the rendering of a particularly difficult piece, but it did not sound like Sarek's style. Who could it be?

If Spock had a vulnerable point in his Vulcan armour it was an incurable curiosity. Dr McCoy had once declared that the First Officer of the Enterprise was as curious as an old pussy cat. To this outrageous statement Spock had coolly retorted that curiosity was a logical and necessary quality in a man of science.

And, he decided, unfolding his long frame, it was only logical to go and find out who was playing this melody with such delightful mastery.

The sound came from beyond the pool, and as he came near he noticed a small gathering of people sitting in the shade. His sharp eyes scanned the company, looking for the musician, and all at once his heart missed a beat and he stopped short. There! It could not be... And yet... Head gracefully inclined over her harp, nimble fingers running on the strings, there she was, a vision of classic beauty. T'Kahalin.

Spock swallowed convulsively, as was his wont when perturbed; then moving cautiously he quietly sat down on the marble curb of the pool to watch and listen from a distance, unknown to the others.

His presence had been noticed, however. Amanda, though apparently unaware, had caught sight of her son and was congratulating herself on the success of her ruse. T'Kahalin's talent and beauty could charm the birds from the trees, and a music lover like Spock was bound to fall under the spell.

Amanda stole a discreet glance at the motionless figure by the pool. Spock was obviously fascinated. Actually, Spock was again overcome by the strange emotions he had felt when he had first met the girl at the Academy. At first curiosity, then enchantment washed over him, leaving him being content and at peace, and he sat there basking in the melodious flow of music.

After a few pieces of traditional melodies the music was interrupted, and the performer exchanged a few words with her hosts. Only then did Spock notice Sarek's presence beside Amanda, and other members of the household, his attention having been focused on T'Kahalin.

After a pause the musician strummed her harp again, and at Amanda's request began to sing, in a pleasant mezzo-soprano, a popular Ni Var ballad, symbol of the Vulcan culture. But such songs were duets, requiring two voices, male and female, as symbolising the duality of things, first opposed and then joined to make a whole. How was it that the girl was singing this Ni Var alone? Spock was surprised that his father, usually so particular about traditional ethics, had not even proposed taking the second part. However Sarek, unaccountably, seemed quite content to relax and listen, a satisfied expression on his face.

After a moment Spock's musical sensitivity overcame his reserve; he rose to his feet and went silently into the sitting room. There he took the family harp down from the wall and tuned the instrument to put it in key with T'Kahalin's, then walked out to the gallery.

His parents had noticed his move, and exchanged a knowing glance, so they were not surprised when Spock came out of the house.

But the musician, caught unaware, gave a start at the sight of the very man who had been foremost in her thoughts since the Academy meeting. She stopped singing in mid-sentence and gazed wide-eyed at the face which had haunted her so illogically. And, as on that fateful day, their eyes met and held for a brief moment.

Then Spock made a slight bow and said, "My apology for interrupting you, but this Ni Var ballad lacks a partner, doesn't

it? May I join you, T'Kahalin?"

Surprised and secretly flattered she bowed her head and replied softly, "I shall be honoured, Commander."

Spock drew a stool forward and sat down, setting the harp on his knee. "With your permission, sir?" he asked Sarek, who with a benevolent nod replied, "By all means, Spock, since our guest has no objection."

This at once provoked a mental comment from Amanda. *\\What do you mean, 'objection', Sarek?* she asked silently through their mindlink. *\\Just look at the girl!*

\\I am looking, my wife, was the smug reply, *\\and I find the exercise most... illuminating.*

\\For shame, Sarek! she laughed softly.

Actually, judging from her slight flush and sparkling eyes, the young lady was more than willing to sing a duet with Spock.

During the short by-play between Sarek and Amanda the two young people had exchanged a watchful glance, hands poised on their harps, then in perfect unison they stoked the strings in a lively tune, T'Kahalin leading with light tinkling notes, Spock following suit in a lower semi-tone to enhance her melodic playing. Then her sweet voice began the first verse, to which his deep baritone responded.

A Ni Var, when well performed, reveals to perfection the tension between opposite forces which is a constant in Vulcan art. The audience sensed that seldom had voices been so well matched, so attuned to express all its depth and beauty. They echoed one another, sometimes opposed, sometimes in accord, and linked by the cascading notes of the harps they finally intertwined in a delicate harmony, like golden and bronze yarns weaving and interweaving to reveal in the warp of a tapestry the perfection of a pattern.

A hush followed the last dwindling notes of the harps, a hush eventually broken by Amanda saying softly,

"My dears, that was wonderful! Please play another."

With a smile T'Kahalin acknowledged the request and looked enquiringly at her partner. They remained with their gazes locked for a few seconds, then as if Spock had read her thoughts he stroked the strings of his harp and raised a quizzical eyebrow. T'Kahalin's eyes sparkled in response, and they plunged themselves again into the harmonious depths of Vulcan tradition.

Never had T'Kahalin, vocational musician though she was, felt such exultation in attaining this perfection of her art. She knew that, alone, she could not have performed so well. The support of Spock's male voice, and the clever accompaniment of his harp, enhanced her own voice as never before. Never before had the practice of her art given such a satisfaction, and all the elusive impressions that she had felt on meeting Spock for the first time came back to her mind. He was, she reflected, a truly extraordinary person.

The 'extraordinary person' was thinking likewise about his partner. Everything about this girl was an enchantment. Her clear eyes, her sweet voice, her personality were for Spock like a source

of cool water in which he soothed his bruised spirit. He had the odd impression that one hour in her company had achieved more than hours of mental exercise. And her eyes, golden brown flecked with green, were so expressive, and so fascinating...

Outwardly perfectly composed, T'Kahalin radiated an aura of such pure happiness that Spock could not help but respond likewise. He had not felt such peace of mind for a long time.

It was almost night, and a gentle breeze was stirring the leaves of the trees along the deserted avenue when Spock, deep in thought, walked slowly back home. He had escorted T'Kahalin home after dinner, and he was reviewing in his mind the moments spent in her company: the impromptu concert; then the quiet conversation with his parents; their tete a tete stroll in the garden before dinner, unspoken thoughts fluttering between them; and just a moment ago, when he had taken his leave on her doorstep, the vision of her lovely face lit by the lanterns...

Spock gave himself a mental shake. This would not do. Such thoughts were unworthy of a Vulcan.

Arriving at the front gate of Sarek's house Spock punched in the unlocking combination, and once indoors bent his steps to the garden. He suddenly felt the need for some quiet and privacy, and strode along the sandy path to the high terrace overlooking the desert.

There, leaning on the stone balustrade smoothed by ages of wind and sand, he gazed out into the moonless Vulcan night. The sand dunes glimmered dimly in the dusk, ghostly in the starlight. The desert breezes ruffled his hair and felt good to his heated brow.

Spock was feeling confused, and yet strangely elated, a state of mind definitely illogical but not altogether unpleasant. On the contrary, it was almost... satisfying. The painful impression of a blemish, of a perpetual taint which had clung to his soul like a curse, had somehow receded, to be replaced by a state of well-being. For the first time since his ordeal he felt more attuned to his inner self. Was it the logical result of the treatment and mental therapy that the Healers had prescribed? It seemed so. However, Spock felt that other factors had been involved, factors far from logical but apparently strangely effective.

Spock looked into the starry sky and tried to put some order into his thoughts. Methodically he began to review the facts and circumstances of the last few days, and reluctantly realised that emotional factors had indeed done much to rouse him from his self-deprecating obsession.

First there was his mother, whose deep love and care he so relished in private, but which he could not and would not openly reciprocate.

The constant support of his father, which he had felt throughout these trying days, proved that their former estrangement was a thing of the past; also the discreet devotion of old Staurak and T'Mina had been a great moral comfort.

But above all there was the close and unique friendship with

Jim. He had felt it in their bond, and it had been, in their daily talks over the telecom, like a balm to his bruised spirit. Even the teasing banter from McCoy had helped to raise his morale. Yes, these factors could not be denied, and they touched him emotionally.

And others came to his mind. For instance, the children next door, who had fallen into the habit of coming with their sehlat for their daily treat of the Enterprise saga, and had turned him into a confirmed storyteller. Their open admiration for 'Commander Spock' had unconsciously done much to restore his self esteem.

But now, more disturbing, was the image of T'Kahalin haunting his mind. Strange, how the fascination he had experienced at their first meeting at the Academy had sprung anew when he had seen her that afternoon. What was there about this Vulcan girl that made her so... special? True, besides T'Pring Spock had not met many Vulcan females, but for all his inexperience he could discern the enormous difference between T'Pring and T'Kahalin - and 'difference' was indeed an understatement.

T'Pring, perfect figure, beautiful face... but cold, scheming and contemptuous; while T'Kahalin truly deserved her name. New Dawn - her inner grace, her eyes shining with intelligence and innocence, her psychic aura touched him to the core. He felt in that girl not only remarkable musical gifts, but a fascinating combination of high intellect and kindheartedness, and confusingly, he was moved.

Spock heaved a sigh as he realised that the evocation of these emotional factors did not get him anywhere. He could not deny that these thoughts were... pleasant... but how very disturbing! This was wrong. He had to control the emotions they roused in his heart. He was a Vulcan, he would not be ruled by his emotions. The Human in him might rejoice in them, but the Vulcan rebelled against them. Once again, dilemma. What was he to do? Spock shuddered, tired and dispirited by this constant conflict.

As he stared out at the dusky scenery, the silence was shattered by the distant howl of a predator tracking its prey. To the despondent Vulcan the cry sounded like a call from the wilderness, like an invitation to go out into the desert, the land of contrasts, of austere beauty, where his people had forged their Vulcan spirit and identity.

Yes, he thought, feeling on his face the sting of sand whipped up by the strong breeze, that was the place to go for a retreat. There he would once and for all cleanse his mind of the perturbing sequels of the probe. There he might come to terms with himself.

Once his decision was made Spock felt somewhat relieved, and after a last look up at the stars he turned and went back to the house.

Some distance away he felt a presence waiting for him. He walked to the meditation garden and found Sarek sitting on the stone bench. He went and sat down beside him.

"My apologies, sir. I was not aware that you were here."

"Apologies are unnecessary, Spock. I wished to speak to you, and I was meditating while waiting for you," Sarek answered, looking searchingly at his son. "I know that you had much on your mind - and I see that you have made your decision."

"Yes." Spock observed with interest the persistence of the telepathic flow between them. "I feel... I need to be alone, and I shall go into retreat for a few days."

"This is a wise decision, my son," Sarek approved. "And where will you go?"

"I have not decided yet. I have no preference. Into the Sas-a-Shar desert, perhaps."

"Indeed," Sarek agreed. "That is a very suitable area for retreat. I recommend you to go as far as the hills of Kerak, beyond the ruins of Zor. The view from the hilltop over the Sas-a-Shar is particularly rewarding, and quite conducive to thoughtful meditation. I occasionally experienced its inspiring atmosphere in my youth."

"Indeed, Father?" Spock was at once touched and surprised by this revelation; meditation is a very personal experience, not to be discussed, and here was his father calmly and openly talking about it. Spock somehow found it difficult to imagine the self-assured Sarek, the pillar of strength he had always tried to emulate, in need of a retreat in the desert.

"Spock," Sarek's voice sounded amused, "do not delude yourself into thinking that you are an exception. We all feel the need, at one time or another, to go into retreat for a thorough introspection. Even the adepts of Mount Seleya, the Masters of Gol, have their moments of doubt which they overcome by rigorous disciplines. Only fools never question themselves, my son."

"I see..." Spock said in a low voice, and wondered anew at the amazing change which had come about in their relationship. His father, the model of his childhood, of whom he had stood in awe and who had always demanded Vulcan perfection from his son, going so far as to reject him when he had refused to submit to his will, was now showing an understanding, a warmth, his son would not have thought possible.

Comforted by this revelation, and by this sharing of empathy with his father, Spock presently asked, "You said that you wished to speak to me?"

"Yes..." Sarek paused for a moment, considering, then said in a grave voice, "Yes. I was apprised an hour ago of an occurrence which essentially concerns you."

Spock waited, feeling Sarek's watchful eyes on his face.

"The Council," Sarek continued, "sent me word that Sharakan is dead."

A sudden surge of anger, hate, disgust washed over Spock. *No... I must control my emotions... I must control!* he thought desperately; and besides the brief clenching of his fists, the tension of his jaw, no sign betrayed his reaction at hearing that hateful name.

Sarek, as though unaware of Spock's inner struggle, went on calmly, "He has been found dead in his cell. He probably chose to destroy himself rather than face his trial."

Spock released his pent-up emotions in a long shuddering sigh

and managed to say impassively, "Probably. But what will happen now that he is dead?"

"With the evidence assembled by the inquisitors, and the information obtained from the prisoners, added to the suicide of Sharakan, the outcome of the trial is certain. The Romulans will be extradited to Starfleet, so their fate is no longer our concern. As for the remaining Vulcans, their trial will be held in camera, in the High Council Hall, and besides giving your evidence you will not have to appear. We shall try to avoid galaxywide publicity; neither the Council nor Starfleet Command desire it. Naturally the mass media are 'on the warpath', as your mother puts it, but so far Sirvann has managed to fend them off, and if you disappear for some time into the desert their greed for sensationalism should wear off. Let us hope so.

"The High Council, nevertheless, wishes to hear you. They are in possession of the statement you made to the Security Officers, but you will have to appear at a special meeting to give a more circumstantial account of your mission."

"Yes, of course," Spock replied. "I shall have to resume my obligations to the Council and the Academy. When am I expected to attend the meeting?"

"When you return from your retreat, my son, then it will be time. When do you plan to leave?"

"Tomorrow, at daybreak."

"Good. Now let me give you some advice, from personal experience. Do not overtax your strength, Spock; do not try to overreach yourself. It would be illogical to restore the balance of your mind to the detriment of your health."

"Of course, Father. I shall be careful. Will you please tell Mother?"

"Certainly, and I shall try to prevent her from worrying to death about you. Her vivid imagination usually makes her think the worst. But take care of yourself, Spock. You know that the fauna of the desert can be very unfriendly. If anything should happen, let me know. Come, it is high time you had some rest."

Father and son walked back to the house in silent understanding.

CHAPTER 14

Dawn on the Sas-a-Shar. The stars which had displayed their dazzling splendour in the darkness of night twinkled away, letting the sky pale down from black to rosy pink.

The dawn wind ran over the dunes, wailing around rocky knolls, stirring clouds of sand, shaking the rare bushes scattered on the desert.

Then gradually the wind died away, light beams shot up like golden spear heads into the reddish sky, and in a hush of expectation the huge crimson disc of Eridani peeped over the horizon.

Light and shadow began to play on the desert vastness, bringing the dunes and ridges into sharp relief, like an etching in reds and ochres, blues and lilacs.

As the sun rose the light gained ground and reached the tall trees of the Sha-Kir-Ah oasis nestled in the glen among the dunes some distance from the hills, and stretched their violet shadows in distorted silhouettes.

Nocturnal animals returned to their lairs, leaving the desert to their daytime counterparts. An eerie call, breaking the silence, heralded the approach of a pair of silver birds which had left the high peaks of the L'Langon for their morning flight over the Sas-a-Shar. They glided high in the rarefied atmosphere, their vast wings casting moving shadows on the sand as they swept around in large circles looking for prey. They flew over the oasis, then headed to the hills of Kerak, a mass of black and crimson volcanic rock fashioned by the wind into such fantastic shapes as to look like some fabulous fortress standing on the red sand.

As the silver birds rose and circled over the hilltop, their weird cries echoing from crags to basalt cliffs, one rock in this mineral castle moved slightly, and appeared to be a living being wrapped in a dark hooded cloak kneeling by an obsidian cliff. The folds of the cloak slipped and two thin hands appeared and pushed the hood back, revealing the finely chiselled features of a Vulcan.

A pair of dark eyes followed the birds as they soared up in the red sky and swept away, flying back to their native mountains. When they had disappeared from view the solitary figure, hands joined in the traditional position, turned his gaze back to the red glow of Eridani.

For the last six days Spock had been leading the ascetic life of an anchorite in complete solitude, his mind turned to meditation and contemplation. His lean face bore the marks of the ordeal he had willingly undergone, but the lack of food and sleep was insignificant compared to the serenity he had finally achieved in close communion with the Vulcan fundamental elements, and thence with the Universal One.

He had communed with space infinity while gazing out at the stars during the vigils of the night, and with the harsh reality of Vulcan nature in enduring the scorching heat, the bitter cold and the blinding sandstorms with unflinching stoicism; now he directed his gaze once again into the blaze of the rising sun, all his being offered to its purifying fire.

To Spock, light was the chosen focus for meditation, and in his quarters on the Enterprise he kept the firepot burning to conduct his mental disciplines, but here on the Sas-a-Shar, immersed as he was in the glaring light of Eridani, he felt himself in total communion with his focal element, and as he progressed through the successive levels of meditation he felt his whole being set ablaze. He was light, he was fire, and in that furnace his very soul was purged of its doubt and its humiliation.

For a long moment Spock remained lost in pure contemplation. Then he slowly went through the last rituals, and his consciousness came back to the mineral world of rock and sand.

The sun was much higher in the sky and the heat was increasing rapidly. Spock rose to his feet, shed his long cloak, and stood



revealed in sand-coloured desert suit and boots. He stretched himself like a cat and performed some relaxing exercises to ease his stiffened limbs.

In doing so he caught the attention of the brown furry companion curled up at his side, fast asleep. The big sehlat stretched and let out a wide yawn. Its large golden eyes looked inquiringly at Spock, and its tail swished in eager anticipation.

Spock picked up his cloak, threw it over his shoulder, then after a last look at the view spreading out to the L'Langon range he started briskly downhill, calling, "Come, Cham, we are going home!"

The sehlat had kept him company during his retreat in the desert. Spock, on leaving ShiKahr, had covered barely half of the trek when he had been overtaken by Cham, who had obviously broken loose again and had followed his trail. Stern orders to go away had been of no avail, so Spock, resigning himself to this unexpected company, had sent a mental message to Sarek in order to reassure the to children as to the fate of their missing pet.

Spock had hoped that no dangerous encounter would put the animal in jeopardy, as it had done to I-Chaya, but the desert had been kind to them. No le-matya, not even the deadly d'mallu vines, had impeded their trek. It was, Spock reflected in a flight of fancy, as though the desert was in a state of grace and willing to enfold him to its bosom.

Spock's long-legged strides took him rapidly to the foot of the hill, and after another forty minutes man and beast arrived at the oasis which was shimmering in the heat. It was torridly hot already, and they gladly found a haven in the shade of the dense foliage of red and blue trees.

Being the only water for kilometers around, the oasis was alive with wild life, and swarmed with multicoloured birds and small creatures of the desert.

Guided by the soft babble of running water, Spock found the source welling from the rocks and cascading into a small basin carved by nature from Vulcan bloodstone, which gave the water a vivid shade of green. The Vulcan brushed aside some fallen leaves and let the sehlat lap noisily while he put his lips to the springwater gushing from the rock and relished its coolness down his parched throat and on his face. Then he remembered that the spring emptied into a fairly deep pool further away under the trees, and he decided to avail himself of the opportunity for a swim.

Spock stripped and lowered himself into the tepid water, mindful of the tranquillity of the place and of its small inmates. For long moments he swam and dived leisurely, soaking his tired body in the emerald green water which sparkled in the sunlight filtering through the branches overhead.

When Spock finally emerged from the pool he found himself the object of curiosity from a number of small furry creatures, and of some of the larger ones, not unlike Terran deer, which slowly came to sniff at him. He was touched by their trustful innocence, and readily stroked their soft brown heads.

The total respect that the Vulcans have for all life forms allows them a special relationship with the wildlife of their planet. It is something that peoples who keep hunting and shooting

their fauna cannot begin to imagine; they do not know how much they miss.

Such were the thoughts that crossed Spock's mind as he stood there surrounded by the gentle animals in this Vulcan version of the Garden of Eden; but he could not know that, with his wet bronzed body glistening in the half light and his faun-like ears and eyebrows, he looked for all the world like the incarnation of Pan, the god of Nature, worshipped by his faithful.

Presently Spock felt ravenous - logical after his long fasting - and went and picked some of the fruit and berries generously offered by the nearest trees and shrubs. Cham had already provided for his own dinner, and was now lying purring contentedly on the clothes that Spock had shed on the bank. The sehlat had proved useful, watching out for predators and providing a natural calorific constant in the cold of the night.

After his frugal meal Spock stretched out on the warm sand to rest for a few hours while Eridani was at its zenith and the heat at its peak. He reflected on the outcome of his retreat, and knew that the experience had been trying, but very beneficial. He felt himself again, attuned to his inner self, as if the delicate balance he had always tried to maintain between his logical Vulcanity and his emotional Humanity, and which had been badly shaken by the violation of his mind, had been re-established. This experience had also allowed him to gauge his capacities and his limitations, and finally to turn hatred and revolt into acceptance and serenity. Yes indeed, this return to the source had been most rewarding... and he would come back.

On that last thought Spock gradually drifted into sleep.

Amanda was in the kitchen with T'Mina when the door opened and Sarek appeared.

"Are you preparing dinner, my wife?" he asked, as serene as ever.

Amanda looked surprised. "Yes, of course. It's high time. Why do you ask?"

"Will you please lay the table for three tonight."

"Oh? Have you invited a guest? You should have told me earlier - I would have prepared something better," his wife replied, a little piqued at being told at the last minute. *Men!* she thought. *All the same - no consideration for the cook.* Then she saw the ghost of a smile on Sarek's mouth, and a twinkle in his eyes.

"Sarek! Who is it? Somebody I know? Is it...?"

"It certainly is, Amanda. Spock."

"Oh Sarek, he's arrived... and I didn't know..."

"Not yet, my wife. He is still on his way, but not very far now. So you still have time to prepare your dinner."

"Good. Thank you for telling me, my dear," Amanda replied with

a knowing look. "Now, T'Mina, let us make something very special for dinner. Something to his taste...and also nourishing. Poor thing, he'll be starving. Now let's see... for a treat..."

"Maybe the chocolate mousse he used to like?" T'Mina suggested.

"Yes, of course. And before... what about...?"

Seeing the two women so engrossed in their recipes that they had forgotten all about him, Sarek quietly retreated back to his study to await Spock's arrival. When he had felt the nearby presence of his son through their telepathic link, he had been comforted by the thought that he was safely back, and also by the distinct impression that all was well now.

This impression was confirmed when some forty minutes later the garden gate clicked open and Sarek and Amanda, waiting on the veranda, watched Spock walk up the steps, bringing a scent of hot sands about him. His thin face, tanned by wind and sun, bore the marks of long fasting and sleepless nights, but his eyes shone with the warm intensity of a hermit transfigured in the desert, as ore in the crucible is transmuted into gold.

He raised his hand and intoned solemnly, "Live long and prosper, Father, Mother."

Sarek stepped forward, and with his keen eyes fixed on his son replied formally, "Spock, give me your thoughts."

As on the first day Spock dropped on one knee, and Amanda stood by and watched with emotion her two Vulcans sharing consciousness. Sarek nodded silently to himself while monitoring Spock's mental flow, then fully satisfied he broke contact and sent a silent message to Amanda.

\\Be comforted, my wife. All is well.

As Spock stood up and faced him Sarek asked quietly, "I perceive that you have found your answers. Am I right?"

"I have, sir, but... I know that more questions will arise... and that I must keep seeking answers."

"That is as it should be, Spock. A Vulcan never gives up his quest. Searching is as necessary as finding; it is essential to the Vulcan soul, in every circumstance of his life. But you have done well, my son. Let the Vulcan peace be with you."

Spock turned to his mother and held out his crossed hands; as she touched them, moved to tears with relief, she said in a teasing voice to cover her emotions,

"Spock, I cannot say how glad we are to see you safe and secure, but you do look a sight, my dear."

Spock fingered the black stubble which covered his cheeks and replied, rather shamefacedly, "I believe you are right, Mother. I certainly need a shave and a shower. With your permission...?"

"Certainly, and a haircut might be advisable, too. You have time before dinner. Go, my dear."

Having dismissed her son like a six-year-old, Amanda looked at

her husband, her eyes glowing with happiness. "So, he is all right now, isn't he?"

"Indeed he is, Amanda, and he is well on the way to achieving what he was seeking: self knowledge, self assurance."

"Oh my dear husband, I am so thankful, so relieved."

"There is certainly much to be thankful for. Spock has overcome, even beyond my expectation. But I fear that he will not have an easy life. He will have to deal again with his conflicting natures, with discouragement, with adversity; but I am confident that in the end he will master his destiny."

A few days later a special meeting was held at the Science Academy in ShiKahr. The great amphitheatre was packed, to the point that extra seats had had to be brought in. The reason for this extraordinary gathering was the resumption of Commander Spock's scientific lectures.

All the Vulcans had heard of his recent adventure; a great many of them had participated in his rescue via the collective mindmeld, and the inborn Vulcan curiosity was at its peak.

A hush fell on the audience when the procession of Academics walked solemnly into the hall, preceding the Board of Professors and the lecturer. When he finally stepped onto the stage, his solitary figure the focus of the spotlights, they all stared in silence at the hero of the day, the man who had survived and overcome the deadly mind probe. The fact that Commander Spock had been received in state by the Supreme Council of Vulcan and awarded its highest honour, the Surak Prize medal, added another palm to his glorious legend; also, the rumour had spread abroad that the Starfleet Commendation on his mission had been expressed in the most glowing terms.

And yet there he was, just like any professor facing his class. Nobody could have told that this quiet-looking man standing silently with his hands clasped before him was one of the most outstanding officers of Starfleet, who had just defeated the Romulan intelligence network.

Spock was conscious of an intense curiosity as well as of a certain degree of understanding around him. Wishing to acknowledge the assistance that the Academy had rendered in his rescue, he deliberately did something inconceivable in a society of telepaths: he lowered his mental shields of his own accord for a brief span to reveal his mental ordeal and to convey his gratitude to all concerned in his salvation.

This unprecedented move was at first received with shock, then with a wary acceptance not devoid of admiration, and soon a steady flow of empathy passed between the man on the stage and all the Vulcans present. Then Spock raised his mental defences again and everyone, secretly moved by the experience, retired into his or her own privacy.

Spock allowed his serene gaze to sweep over the assembly, then began his address.

"As I told you in my previous lecture, the discoveries made by

my team on the Enterprise are, for a large part, due to..."

And the deep voice filled the silent amphitheatre as though nothing had happened since Spock's last lecture.

Spock was walking briskly up the stairs of the Academy, nodding on the way to passing acquaintances. He had just taken his leave of Director Sorel and Professor Stolar of the Science Department. The next day he was due to take the interstellar flight back to Starbase 10; his leave was over, and according to Vulcan custom he was paying duty calls.

One visit, however, he had kept until last, as it would probably be the most pleasant - and the most difficult. He followed the corridor indicated by the information computer in the entrance hall, and presently heard singing in the distance, which meant that he was nearing his objective. Finally he reached the music section, stopped at a door, and looked in. A charming sight met his eyes.

A dozen children, some standing, others sitting on stools and holding small harps in their laps, formed a circle and gravely listened to their teacher. She was giving some explanation backed by a short demonstration on her own harp. On her signal the clear voices rose again in a traditional Vulcan song, to the accompaniment of the harps played by energetic little fingers. Spock stood quietly by the door, listening with appreciation to T'Kahalin's class, and admiring the skill of the young musicians.

But soon the music petered out; some of the pupils had caught sight of Spock, and were staring wide-eyed at the intruder. Following their gaze, T'Kahalin looked round, and at the sight of her visitor she stood up and quietly ended the lesson for the day.

One by one the children took their leave and reluctantly filed out, peeping at Spock with curiosity as they left. His sharp ears caught them whispering behind him.

"It's Commander Spock!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I tell you. It is Spock."

"Oooh! Oooh!"

With a quizzical lift of an eyebrow Spock watched them go, then entered the room and exchanged formal greetings with their teacher.

"My apologies, T'Kahalin," he said. "I did not mean to interrupt your class."

"It does not matter - we had almost finished," she replied and began to tidy her desk.

A minute went by in awkward silence, then Spock said, "If you are going home now, may I accompany you through the park?"

Though she was both pleased and surprised by the unexpected proposal, the girl did not show it and merely assented with quiet dignity.



A few minutes later they were walking silently under the trees, very much aware of one another, but seemingly indifferent.

Spock was still strangely attracted to T'Kahalin's personality, but in a more controlled and reasonable way. The Vulcan in him was now in charge, and the extravagant and disturbing emotions that his Human half had shamelessly exhibited were now kept severely in check. However, it was logical for the Vulcan to appreciate beauty and talent, and therefore to allow himself some appreciative sidelong glances at his companion.

Presently Spock declared, "Permit me to commend you on the performance of your pupils. They have given a creditable demonstration of their talent and that of their teacher."

Blushing a lovely shade of jade, the woman replied, "That is praise indeed, coming from a connoisseur such as you, Commander."

"I but speak the truth, T'Kahalin. Let me say how much I have appreciated our small musical gatherings at my father's house. I... I shall miss them when I am gone," Spock admitted, his Human half surfacing again.

So will I, T'Kahalin thought privately; then, "You are leaving tomorrow, I think?" she said aloud.

"Indeed... and I have come to bid you farewell."

"That is kind of you," she murmured, walking on slowly, her face averted.

Another silence, full of unspoken thoughts, then she said hesitantly, "You will be gone a long time, I expect, with your exploratory missions?"

"I cannot say yet," Spock replied. "I shall know upon my return to the Starbase. But if my ship happens to be in this quadrant I shall come back home for leave, even for a few days, if I can. I would like to show my home planet to my Captain. He has only been here once, for a very short time..."

Spock stopped, embarrassed. What had come over him to mention that? A glance at T'Kahalin reassured him. Like the rest of Vulcan, she might have heard about T'Pring's challenge and the ensuing combat, but at least she had the good taste to appear unaware of the shameful event.

"Your Captain?" she said. "Yes, of course - Captain Kirk of the USS Enterprise. His reputation has reached our world. He is your friend... I am told."

"He is indeed..." Spock paused. What could he say? How could he describe the intangible, warm feeling he shared with Jim?

T'Kahalin nodded, as if she did not need any explanation, as if she understood. Fascinating girl... She almost seemed to perceive his thoughts, strongly shielded though they were in the privacy of his mind.

After strolling for a while Spock resumed, "I do not know when I shall come back, but when I do... will you allow me to call on you?"

No reply. T'Kahalin kept her head down, not yet trusting herself to meet Spock's dark, magnetic gaze.

"I thought," he continued diffidently, "that our musical encounters had given you as much satisfaction as to me. Was I wrong? Wouldn't you care to share other Ni-Var songs with me, in my father's house?"

A brief pause while T'Kahalin tried to control her breath, then she whispered, "I would... very much." Then giving up all pretence of cool indifference she stopped, turned and faced Spock, and offered him the incredible spectacle of a Vulcan female with tears in her eyes.

Spock caught his breath, at once shocked and dazzled by the expression in her golden-green eyes. "You do care?" he murmured.

She nodded mutely.

Between them words were unnecessary. From their first encounter they had realised how much they could share and express in a simple glance. Now, as they stood in the garden, apparently indifferent, Spock and T'Kahalin, staring at one another, were silently conveying their mutual appreciation, understanding, and above all their deep regret at parting.

Indeed, words were unnecessary. Spock, who felt his Human and Vulcan sides in agreement for once, was moved by the response he read in her eyes. When he remembered that icy, disdainful look that T'Pring had cast at him, and which had hurt so much, he could hardly believe that a Vulcan girl could look at him with such a warm, admiring gaze. And he knew now that this was another overwhelming reason to return to Vulcan.

EPILOGUE

The transporter halls of Starbase 10 were exceptionally crowded that morning. The crews of several vessels, Starships, cargo transporters and intergalactic liners in orbit around the planet were beaming up or down according to their schedules. Many of them belonged to the USS Enterprise, returning to duty after a month on leave. All these people running about, talking loudly and laughing were creating quite a commotion in the waiting rooms.

Standing apart from the turmoil a small group of officers were waiting and scanning with some impatience the arrivals displayed on an electronic board. One of them, in the blue tunic of a Chief Surgeon, was particularly vocal.

"Will anybody tell me what is keeping those damned Vulcans from sending their passengers down? They've been orbiting for ages now. What are they waiting for?"

"Patience, Bones," replied another officer in the golden shirt of Command. "Don't you see the traffic jam in the transporters? They have to wait their turn. You know, a regular liner isn't like a Starship. No preferential treatment, no ranking!"

"Maybe the Doctor has been missing Spock so much he can't wait any longer," put in a junior officer, nudging his oriental colleague.

"Just you wait till your next physical, Pavel, and you'll see if I miss you!" threatened McCoy good-humouredly.

A loud beep interrupted the conversation. Unhooking a communicator from his belt the Captain said in a low voice, "Kirk here. What is it, Scotty?"

"Captain, how much longer will ye be down there? The Base Control Station wants to know what's keeping us. Looks like they want to get rid of us. We've got the go-ahead signal already."

"Damn! Tell them I won't leave without my First Officer. Is the crew complete now?"

"Aye, sir. Everybody is back and accounted for, except the five of you and Mr Spock."

"Right, Scotty. Try and keep the Control people in check for a while longer. It shouldn't be long now. Play it up, will you? Tell them anything... I don't know... That you mislaid the dilithium crystals?"

"Captain, I never! What will you do to my reputation as an Engineer?"

"Okay, Mr Scott, take it easy. And don't leave without us. Kirk out."

When the laughter had abated McCoy, keeping his part as a grouser, complained, "All the same, if they used shuttles instead of molecule-scramblers, our precious Vulcan would be here by now!"

Almost at once Lt. Uhura, who was on the look-out, let out a whoop. "Captain! They're starting to beam down from the Vulcan ship now! This way!"

Like one man the five from the Enterprise pushed their way to the transporter room indicated.

They managed to get close to the transporter platform and watched the travellers sparkle into being. At last the room rang with a "There he is!" shouted by all of them together, and as a tall, distinguished-looking Vulcan stepped down he found himself surrounded by familiar smiling faces. Though his expression remained unperturbed, his amazement was betrayed by the slow rise of his eyebrows right up to his glossy fringe.

Kirk, smiling broadly, clapped him on the shoulder. "By god, Spock, it's good to see you again!"

"Captain, I am impressed. Why this reception?"

"Because we had to make sure that you hadn't run into trouble again, Spock," McCoy explained. "We really thought that we'd seen the last of you this time. Can you believe it, Jim? I'm real glad to see those pointy ears again!"

"Doctor," Spock remarked coolly, but with a warm glow in his eyes, "you should know by now that one does not get rid of me so easily."

"Thank god for that, Mr Spock!" Uhura exclaimed.

Spock and Kirk exchanged one of their knowing glances, then the Captain said briskly, "Come on, everyone, we should be on our way!" and flicked his communicator open.

"Enterprise? Kirk here."

"Have you got Mr Spock, Captain?"

"Yes, Scotty, he's here, safe and sound. Six to beam up, please."

"Right away, sir."

A moment later the six Enterprise officers disappeared in a sparkle of light, and within the hour their glorious Starship left Starbase 10 for another mission somewhere in the galaxy.